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Chapter 8

Adventure Playgrounds and Postwar Reconstruction

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The history of the playground is marked by an irresolvable contradiction: on the one hand, modernity has conceptualized play as a biologically inherited drive that is spontaneous, pleasurable, and free. It valorized the subjective experience of play as an attribute of the autonomous, individual self. On the other hand, modern societies began to rationalize and shape children's play from the outside to advance social, educational, and political goals. Thus playgrounds are very much about censoring and restricting types of play deemed undesirable and displacing them from places deemed dangerous or corrupting, such as the street. This contradiction is embedded in the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which enshrined play as a universal right of the individual and, at the same time, defined it as an instrument of social policy: "The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purpose as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right."¹

This statement encapsulates the paradox of the modern discourse of play. Enlightened societies take up the obligation to provide children with the means of play, yet children do not possess play as their right, as it is subjected, just like education, to the social and political designs of others. The adventure playground movement, the subject of this chapter, sought to transcend this contradiction by constituting play practices that appeared to be operating from the inside of the subject, from the child's own free will. It intended to enhance and encourage children's own play rather than restrict or shape it from without. Yet this permissive approach was not aimed to liberate play from being an instrument of policy, but rather the opposite, to intensify the effectiveness of policy.

Adventure playgrounds were promoted in England after World War II as the playground for the future, in an explicit critique of the conventional playground with its "four S's": the swing, seesaw, sandbox, and slide. An adventure playground has no readymade play equipment and no predetermined agenda for what should take place in it. Children introduce content and meaning to the playground through their own action. Whereas the conventional playground operates by inciting kinetic modes of pleasure, the adventure playground engages the child through a qualitatively different kind of gratification. It induces the pleasure of experimenting, making, and destroying. Yet while the conventional playground is designed to function without adult intervention, the adventure playground is predicated on the presence of a play leader who administers the use of tools and materials and guides the

behavior of children to maintain safety and promote cooperation among them. Thus, while advocates claimed that play activity “must grow from inside and never be directed from outside,”² this type of playground required professional guidance, since children had to be taught how to play and become autonomous and free.

Promoters of adventure playgrounds heralded them as being more appropriate to the true nature of children and their play, as well as providing a more pleasurable and meaningful experience than the traditional playground, which they portrayed as boring and sterile.³ Although its adherents portray the adventure playground as radically different from the traditional playground, its critics tend to flatten the differences between them. Galen Cranz, a sociologist who studied the history of park and playground design in the United States, argued that the two kinds of playgrounds perform the same ideological function, that of social control. According to her, both playgrounds mask class inequalities and enforce social stereotypes by organizing the subjects of a politically weaker class in the supposedly neutral biological category of age.⁴ David Cohen, a psychologist, criticized the adventure playground as the instrumentalization of play for social or educational goals. Cohen argued that play ought to be promoted because it is pleasurable, not because it is useful.⁵ These positions frame play policies in Marxist terms as social control or in Weberian terms as the rationalization of pleasure. They presuppose that there is a prior condition in which play or subjects are free. Whereas these critics equate power with domination and compulsion, this chapter takes from Michel

Foucault the assumption that any social practice involves a relation of power.⁶ In the case of the playground, power does not operate by dominating or disciplining subjects who were previously free, but rather by activating subjects and making them aspire to be free. The point is to examine what kind of subjects and truths this type of power produces.

Through the examination of play as a strategy of power, I argue that the adventure playground corresponds with what the sociologist Nikolas Rose identified as the shift from the contractual model of citizenship to one that stresses the subjective aspects of citizenship. In Governing the Soul (1990), Rose claimed that during the World War II, “Citizenship . . . acquired a subjective form. From this point forth, winning the war, and winning the peace, required the active engagement of the civilian in the social and political process, a shaping of wills, conscience, and aspirations, to forge social solidarity and individual responsibilities in the name of citizenship and democracy.”⁷ Rose showed that this mode of power operated by studying, measuring, and governing the interiority of the population, constituting a self-regulated, self-improving society made of individuals who internalized the obligation to be free. The adventure playground demonstrates how this new form of citizenship operated: it made the interiority of children observable and governable precisely because free play was conceptualized as a subjective realm of freedom requiring the participation of consenting, active subjects.

Yet postwar play policy had a complementary symbolic dimension that accounted for its more unusual aspects, such as the legitimization of acts of destruction, the appropriation of junk and waste as desirable play materials, and the practice of establishing adventure playgrounds on bombed sites. This last feature is incompatible with our contemporary belief that childhood ought to be sheltered from the violence and destruction of war. To account for the interplay between play as a social technology and as a narrative of reconstruction, I will examine the historical development of this institution, from its Danish origins to its dissemination into the English context of reconstruction.

Beginnings: The Danish Junk Playground

The Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen first suggested the concept of the adventure playground in Park Policy (1931). Following his observations of children at play in construction sites and junkyards, Sørensen proposed to enclose a space where children would be permitted to play in ways otherwise prohibited to them: “Perhaps we should try to set up waste material playgrounds in suitable large areas where children would be able to play with old cars, boxes, and timber. It is possible there would have to be some supervision to prevent children fighting too wildly and to lessen the chances of injury but it is likely that such supervision will not be necessary.”⁸ The idea was first tested in 1943, during the German occupation. The architect Dan Fink commissioned

Sørensen to design a junk playground, as these playgrounds were initially named, for the Emdrupvænge housing estate at the outskirts of Copenhagen.

That the idea came out of a landscape discourse rather than a pedagogical or psychological one marks the beginning of the involvement of landscape architects in the design of playgrounds. This development had a contradictory influence on the form, layout, and content of the playground. On the one hand, the impulse of the modernist designer was to endow the playground with the aesthetics of abstraction, as was the case with the artist Isamu Noguchi and the architect Aldo van Eyck.⁹ This inclination toward the abstract and the elementary grew out of the idealism of Friedrich Froebel, who offered children toys with simple geometrical forms that represented a harmonic, perfect image of the world. But it also interpreted the playground as a landscape, making art into a useful part of everyday life.

On the other hand, designers inclined toward functionalism, such as Sørensen, sought to constitute the design of the playground upon the analysis of play activity rather than upon formal or compositional concerns. If the modernist imperative was to make play environments “imaginative,” it followed that the “imagination” at play should be that of the child, not that of the architect. This understanding was in accord with the pragmatism of John Dewey, who privileged the child’s present inclinations over an abstract conception of what he or she should be in the future, and valued

learning through experience over repetitive performance of predetermined activities imposed from without.¹⁰

Sørensen's original scheme employed abstract and symbolic forms that represented the basic elements of the Danish rural landscape—the beach, the meadow, and the grove. Yet children's activities inside the playground's premises did not correspond with the artistic status of the playground as a landscape. Hence Sørensen's admission that “of all the things I have helped to realize, the junk playground is the ugliest; yet for me it is the best and most beautiful of my works.”¹¹ The anti-aesthetic position of the playground was most pronounced in its appropriation of junk as desirable play material. Emdrup's first play leader, John Bertelsen, coined the term junkology to describe the activity of children. He defined it as the inversion of social values where “all pedagogical and occupational ideas were quickly turned upside down, becoming junkology.”¹² While Bertelsen appraised the creations of children, their towers, caves, and huts as evidence of a primordial human instinct of making and inhabiting shelters, akin to nesting, he also represented their work as a critical recreation of the world outside the playground. Emdrup may be seen as the realization of Dada aesthetics, in which the playful and collective reassembling of the leftovers of a machine civilization presented an alternative conception of dwelling, where the unmediated act of building is seen as a direct expression of the values and desires of the subjects. Yet the junk aesthetic was controversial, and the promoter of the playground in England, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, found it necessary

to change its name to adventure playground precisely because of the disruptive and degrading connotation of junk, especially after her experience in launching the Clydesdale playground in 1949. The process was delayed for three years because of the intense opposition of neighbors who equated junk with hooliganism.¹³

Although Sørensen's initial proposal did not require an adult play supervisor, the Workers' Co-operative Housing Association employed one as part of its housing policy. This modification of the concept of the junk playground may be gleaned from the play practices initiated by Bertelsen and Agnete Vesteregn, who replaced him in 1947.¹⁴ Bertelsen stressed that the purpose of the leader was not to govern children from the outside and direct their building activity toward a useful goal, but rather to act from within, by allowing them to pursue their own projects. He argued that “the initiative must come from the children themselves. . . . I cannot, and indeed will not, teach the children anything.”¹⁵ The hands-off approach had both a social and a political significance. First, children were allowed to play without intervention, so their activity could come under observation as a way of gaining “insight into the mind of the child and his various conflicts.”¹⁶ Assuming that children had an emotional interiority points to the role of this playground as part of welfare housing policy. Bertelsen claimed that material differences between economically self-sufficient tenants and those living on welfare had less impact on children's well-being than differences in the emotional investment of parents. The playground provided these children what their homes appeared to be

lacking, mainly an emotionally supportive and nurturing environment.

The second purpose of relinquishing authority was to foster children's self-responsibility and promote social skills such as resolving conflicts peacefully. The promotion of democratic values through play coincided with the crystallization of a new educational program, which, to use the words of the progressive pedagogue Inger Merete Nordentoft from the last months of the war, sought to make children into "democratic citizens, humans who can think independently, can be responsible and capable of showing tolerance towards others and have the courage and firmness to defend their own convictions."¹⁷ The use of anti-authoritarian methods was understood to be a challenge to the occupier's Fascist ideology. At the same time, pedagogues were alarmed that children became over-identified with the Resistance and its legitimization of violence and disobedience, which threatened to disrupt the conceptual separation of childhood from adult life. The permissive atmosphere in the playground provided a safe and creative simulation of lawlessness, where children could regain the trust in society through their engagement with a play leader who acted as their advocate and took their side.

Vesteregn advanced play practices that introduced children into a more stable, rule-driven society. Making an implicit critique of her predecessor, she argued that the goal of an adventure playground was not "to make a mess out of everything, ruin things, fight, swear, use rough language or be anti-social. The purpose must be quite the

opposite. Children should not remain in this destructive state; they need help to be brought out of it."¹⁸ Each of these strategies of administering play had a corresponding architectural expression. Bertelsen's playground was nomadic, while Vesteregn's was sedentary, with permanent structures added to accommodate organized activities such as painting, clay modeling, and printmaking. Yet despite these differences, both attempted to advance social policies by acting upon children's interiority. The subsequent history of the junk playground in England reaffirms this claim, while demonstrating the flexibility of the concept and its adaptability to local and historical needs.

The English Adventure Playground

The Danish experiment might have remained a local curiosity had it not come under the attention of Allen, who identified with its ethos and became its ceaseless promoter. Like Sørensen, she was a landscape architect, yet her influential role was more dependent on her social status and organizational skills in the voluntary sector than her professional authority. During World War II, Allen became involved in child-centered causes, most notably the campaign to reform the institutional care of orphans and abandoned children, whom Allen defined as "children deprived of a normal home life."¹⁹ Her advocacy led to the Curtis Commission and the 1948 Children Act. This act endowed children with subjective rights, such as the right to happiness and a loving, supportive family environment.

After the war, Allen represented England at international conferences that assessed the effects of the war on children. This activity took place between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, an interim period marked by internationalism and an aversion to violence and nationalism in Europe. Allen, who was associated with the antiwar movement through her husband Clifford Allen, the leader of the Independent Labour Party and a conscientious objector during World War I, advanced the antiwar cause by constituting children as a separate, vulnerable group that transcended divisions of class, nation, or race.²⁰ She promoted the establishment of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (1948) and served as its founding president.

In 1946, as part of her international and pacifistic effort to constitute “early child education as the best way of creating peace-loving citizens,” Allen was taken to visit Emdrup. In her words, she “was completely swept” off her feet.²¹ Allen began to promote the idea in lectures, pamphlets, conferences, and most influentially in an essay she published in the Picture Post in 1946. The abundantly illustrated essay galvanized the English public by showing how the Danish model could be used for postwar reconstruction (Figure 8.1).

The essay began with a critique of the conventional playground, arguing that it failed to attract children and remove them from the street. Allen claimed that this failure was literally a matter of life and death:



Figure 8.1: “War Games”: Photo taken by Francis Reiss to illustrate Lady Allen of Hurtwood’s essay in Picture Post, November 16, 1946.

Juvenile delinquency and the death of young people in road accidents both arise, in part at least, from the inadequate and unimaginative manner in which local authorities try to meet the need for creative play. . . . The best the Borough Engineer can do is to level the ground, surface it with asphalt, and equip it with expensive mechanical swings and slides. His paradise is a place of utter boredom for the children, and it is little wonder that they prefer the dumps of rough wood and piles of bricks and rubbish of the bombed sites, or the dangers and excitements of the traffic.²²

Allen presented Emdrup as a “revolutionary” playground that could resolve this crisis. The demand for a more creative and intensive play experience reflected the wartime anxiety that the nation’s children, schooled in war and destruction, had become insensitive to the amenities of playgrounds and parks. Alongside its preventive functions, Allen stressed the role of the playground in fostering “a democratic community.” This goal was advanced not only by providing children with the responsibility for operating the playground by themselves but also by designing it to appeal to all children irrespective of gender or age. Her pragmatic reason for this inclusive approach was that working-class children were often entrusted with the care of their younger siblings and could not play in the playing fields and playgrounds that catered to a particular age and gender group. Creating a variety of play opportunities allowed all children to participate in a play community.

Although Allen provided the impetus for bringing the idea to England, adventure playgrounds were promoted and operated by a coalition of local, national, and international organizations. The first playgrounds at Camberwell (1948) and Clydesdale (initiated in 1949, opened in 1952) were operated with the aid of the International Voluntary Service for Peace. Other sponsors included the University Settlement movement, Save the Children Fund, local councils, and the National Under Fourteens Council.

In the period after the war, children’s play with junk became important enough to be the subject of conferences, newspaper

articles, and committees. A five-day conference in 1948, sponsored by the Cambridge House University Settlement, examined the first two experimental junk playgrounds, Camberwell and Morden, which had been in operation for less than a year. Junk playgrounds received extensive press coverage, demonstrating that their visibility was in inverse proportion to their quantity. This visibility was not accidental. The Lollard adventure playground was intentionally sited near the Houses of Parliament. Allen, who chaired the playground committee, intended it to be a demonstration playground for visiting members of Parliament (Figure 8.2).²³



Figure 8.2: The Lollard adventure playground on the site of a bombed school. The House of Parliament can be seen across the river.

From London the playground spread to other cities such as Liverpool, Hull, Coventry, Leicester, Leeds, and Bristol, where they were opened in blighted or blitzed neighborhoods as a component of urban renewal. They were also built in the new towns surrounding

London, most notably Crawly and Welwyn, where they were integrated into Hertfordshire's progressive, child-centered educational infrastructure.

Playgrounds on Bombed Sites

What differentiated Allen's presentation from the Danish precedent was her suggestion that these playgrounds be built on bombed sites. Following her essay, which was titled "Why Not Use Our Bombed Sites Like This?," the first junk playground in England was built on the site of a bombed church in Camberwell, and the third was opened on a destroyed residential property on Clydesdale Road, Paddington (Figures 8.3). Likewise, the Lollard Adventure Playground (1955–1960) was built on the site of a bombed school, and was informally known as the "ruins." At the end of the 1950s most of the ten playgrounds operating in London on bombed sites were closed when the properties were returned to their owners for redevelopment.

From the perspective of urban reconstruction, the temporary conversion of bombed sites into playgrounds was part of a broader debate about how to rebuild London, as well as to plan for the return of more than a million evacuated children.²⁴ This policy went against the grain of the dominant planning ideology, epitomized by Patrick Abercrombie's 1943 County of London Plan. Abercrombie's proposal conceived the blitz as an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild London according to rational, functionalist

principles. The plan dealt extensively with the place of the child in the city by dividing the metropolis into self-sufficient neighborhood units organized around the school and the playground.²⁵ Allen advanced the more modest suggestion that reconstruction ought to be incremental and pragmatic. Yet her truly radical proposition was that reconstruction should be carried out with the participation of the population. Adventure playgrounds were to be developed out of local initiatives by parents and were to be built by children themselves with the help of voluntary organizations. Playgrounds operated as independent associations that were headed by committees, whose members included residents, pedagogues, social workers, local politicians and, in some cases, members of the local clergy.



Figure 8.3: The Clydesdale Playground, 1952

Such a model for reconstruction reflects to a unique historical moment when English planners experimented with grass-roots democratic planning, most notably the 1946 Middlesbrough rehabilitation plan. In “The Middlesbrough Experiment: Planning from Within,” the planner Max Lock argued that a participatory planning process would facilitate the acceptance of the plan because citizens, including children, were involved in the process. He also stated that the plan would meet “the citizen’s personal and social needs such as an outlet for leadership, for creative action, and for the satisfaction of the deep-lying desire for significance, dignity, and freedom. For in supplying such needs, may we not be approaching the heart of the post-war problem—the problem of minimising the occasion for the exercise of the totalitarian spirit which arises wherever lives are frustrated?”²⁶

Lock's statement demonstrates that reconstruction assumed a psychological and civic dimension beyond that of repairing material damage. Participation has a preventive dimension, as an antidote to totalitarianism as a form of political delinquency. In a similar fashion, the adventure playground was aimed at promoting an active and egalitarian mode of citizenship through the activity of play, as an antidote to collective and individual misconduct. George Burden, the chairman of the Camberwell playground committee and a psychiatric social worker at King's College Hospital, explained the rationale of building playgrounds on sites of destruction and its relation to citizenship and delinquency: “Playgrounds such as ours set in a district which has suffered much during the war can lead a

child away from the tolerance and approval of that destruction which is associated with the war. The child of nine or ten makes few moral judgments. . . . It lies in our power to assist him in choosing what is socially desirable and morally right.”²⁷ Photographic representations of Camberwell stressed the constructive and cathartic aspect of play on bombed sites. The caption describes the children as “postwar builders” providing a metaphor for reconstruction as a redeeming act (Figure 8.4). Why then was it deemed desirable to promote children's play on the ruins of their neighborhoods?

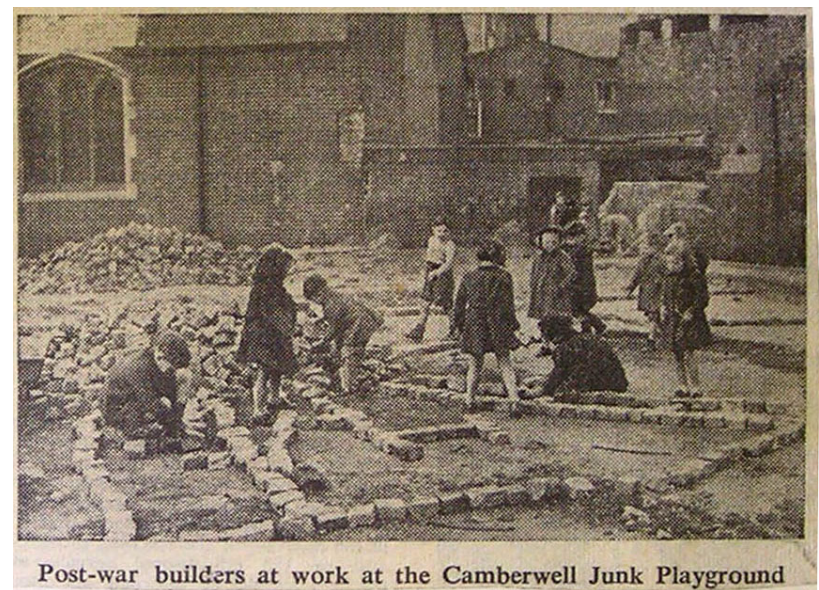


Figure 8.4: Camberwell Junk playground on the site of a bombed church. Times Educational Supplement, 5 June 1948.

Play, Citizenship, and Violence

In her article, Allen stressed the preventive function of the playground as an antidote to juvenile delinquency. This is, of course, not a new claim, as the prevention of delinquency was one of the main reasons initially used to justify the playground. Yet the adventure playground redefined the relationship between delinquency, democracy, and play. The new role of play may be gleaned by comparing the adventure playground with its English forerunner, the turn-of-the-century play center movement. University settlement houses sponsored play centers in slum areas as child-saving schemes.²⁸ The preventive strategy was to constitute a separate space for play in order to dissociate working-class youth from the street and its demoralizing influence. Its promoters hoped to install in these children the discipline, character, and vocational skills needed for a respectable way of life. With the enfranchisement of the working classes and later of women, play practices were modified to initiate these populations into a liberal mode of democratic citizenship, encapsulated by the concept of fair play.²⁹ Yet the play center functioned as a protosocial work institution. It employed play superintendents to manage and direct children's behavior, and more significantly, to observe children's play and evaluate it in relation to the socioeconomic conditions at home, as a method for revealing the underlying causes for poverty and crime.³⁰ Play practices evolved with the growing influence of psychology in understanding and treating juvenile delinquency. Classical

criminology conceived the criminal act as the result of the subject's rational choice and sought to deter it through punishment. Biological criminology explained it in hereditary or organic defects. The new psychology constituted criminal behavior as a mental illness and sought its etiology in the subject's biography—in unresolved mental conflicts occurring at critical stages of childhood development.³¹ From the 1920s onward, English social workers and psychologists working in child guidance clinics began to observe and interpret the unregulated play of children as a way of accessing and assessing the psychic structure of the delinquent.

Moreover, with the advent of psychology, play assumed a therapeutic function. Sigmund Freud argued that the pleasure of play lies in repeating a traumatic experience and mastering it, often by taking revenge upon a substitute.³² Play, as catharsis, was believed to purge disruptive emotions and provide a safe outlet for dangerous instincts. But the stakes for play were set higher, as psychoanalysis established an analogy between individual aggression and collective political violence. Anna Freud observed the effects of the war on children at the Hampstead War Nursery, reflecting that: "The real danger is not that the child, caught up all innocently in the whirlpool of the war, will be shocked into illness. The danger lies in the fact that the destruction raging in the outer world may meet the very real aggressiveness, which rages in the inside of the child."³³ During World War II, children were no longer conceived as innocent creatures traumatized by the violence of history, but rather as subjects who might identify with it. This

pessimistic conception of the child's nature contributed to the revision of the function of playground.

Branch Street: Play as Catharsis

The discourse that equates collective and individual manifestations of violence, and the idea that violence could be healed by returning to the scene of destruction, frame the work of the Austrian artist and pedagogue Marie Paneth. During the blitz, Paneth managed play centers in London's air raid shelters. I will examine her project at length, since Paneth provided an exact blueprint for the adventure playground, including the use of bombed sites and self-building. Her proposal thus illuminates the strategy of power implicit in adventure playground practices, and positions it in relation to the war.

The immediate context for her work was wartime anxiety over the apparent increase in juvenile delinquency.³⁴ This anxiety reflected the need to single out those who did not identify with the collective war effort, and the concern that the wartime weakening of parental authority would inevitably lead to collapse in discipline and morality. Children's misbehavior became a problem in air raid shelters and evacuation centers, and the government was compelled to introduce play centers to keep the children occupied and content. From 1942 to 1943, Paneth managed a play center for so-called slum children who were too violent to be evacuated. She provided

an account of this experiment in Branch Street: A Sociological Study (1944).

Paneth dealt with extreme manifestations of aggression, including stealing, destruction of property, and sexual abuse of female volunteers, by taking what she called the "non-resistance line." The rationale behind her refusal to counter or punish violent behavior was twofold. Paneth interpreted the violence directed toward her as the transference of aggression that was addressed to others. Paneth assumed that the root cause of delinquency was in traumatic childhood experiences brought about by overcrowding, poverty, and punitive childrearing techniques. Observing rather than suppressing destructive play provided the play leader an indirect access to the secrets of the home. The refusal to condemn or judge worked as a strategy for winning the children over and gaining their trust. She directed her staff, mostly conscientious objectors, to grant the children full license to act out their aggression until they become, in her words, "sick of their own method," after which they could "start life at the new place with rule and order."³⁵ The outcome was that the children destroyed the play center, and her staff resigned. This failure brought about a revision of her methods; Paneth began to work with the children on their own turf and accepted their culture of street play, which appeared to diminish their aggression. This development led Paneth to conclude her account with a proposal for a new type of play center, where such children would be provided with a bombed site to build their own play center and in the process heal themselves: "It is a damaged bit. Its very existence is a

reminder of damage and destruction. A sore spot and harmful to all of us. But it could be put to good use even before the war is over. It seems to me it could have a very healing effect if one were allowed to build upon the very spot where damage has been done.”³⁶ Paneth concluded her proposal by claiming that slum conditions as existing in Branch Street provided the recruiting grounds for fascism: “We should also remember that the horde which Hitler employed to carry out his first acts of aggression—murdering and torturing peaceful citizens—was recruited mainly from desperate Branch Street youths, and that to help the individual means helping Democracy as well.”³⁷

The wartime press extensively reviewed her publication, because children’s violent behavior assumed a political significance during this period of conflict. Paneth’s study coincided with the wartime exposure of poverty in surveys such as the 1943 Our Towns report, which made the welfare of children a national concern. Such surveys contributed to the formation of the wartime consensus that the state should assume responsibility for providing welfare.³⁸ Even Churchill, who otherwise sought to postpone the discussion of social services until after the war, was nevertheless compelled to define children’s well-being as the foundation of any future social policy.³⁹

Branch Street is an account of using play to build communities on a participatory model of creative citizenship. The act of building playgrounds on bombed sites established a correspondence between the narrative of reconstructing the nation and the self, by which

marginalized and damaged subjects could integrate themselves into society. Paneth provided an alternative to both the contractual mode of citizenship based on a rational model of the subject and the model of citizenship based on group identification with the nation or the leader, as both models were brought into crisis by the mass appeal of fascism. Although children resisted any form of authority, they were patriotic and idolized Churchill. A critic from the Times Educational Supplement was satisfied with this proof of loyalty to the nation and doubted if Paneth’s principle of freedom and autonomy was desirable for the slum population; he assumed that “they wanted a leader whom they could follow.”⁴⁰ But such a libidinal tie with the leader was precisely what Paneth was opposed to, as her goal was to make her subjects accept the responsibility of freedom rather than delegate it to others.

Branch Street illuminates the rationale behind the domestic activity that often takes place in adventure playgrounds, such as making fires, cooking midday meals, and dwelling in self-made homes and tree houses. Although these phenomena are all too readily explained as an expression of the child’s desire to imitate the world of adults, Paneth’s work suggests the strategic purpose of defining the playground as a second home. Examination of the daily reports submitted to playground committees on the play activities of children, such as the one filed by Clydesdale’s play leader Peter Gutkind, demonstrates that the second home allowed the social worker to access the first, and to pin the pathologies of the slum child in inadequate mothercraft: “Today one little girl complained

bitterly about her mother who "has no love for me, she always kicks me out." We might say that as they have no place to play inside in the happy setting of a home they develop a certain antagonism against the home and later follows boredom and then delinquency."⁴¹ By reenacting childhood in a permissive and supportive environment, children's attitude toward society and authority could be rescued from being a projection, a repetition of their resistance and aggression toward the imperfect parenthood they experienced at home.

Adventure Playground as Experiment in Anarchy

Paneth employed the strategy of anarchy to allow violence to reach catharsis. Yet Burden provided another conceptual foundation for promoting anarchical play practices, noting that "A bored child is a menace to the community, especially if he has intelligence, for boredom and inactivity almost inevitably lead to delinquency."⁴² This strategy implies that social workers began to conceptualize delinquency as a contextual reaction to a given situation, an expression of a lack in the environment to engage and stimulate the subject. This approach is radically different in its empiricism from the stigmatic notion that delinquency has its roots in a social or individual pathological trait. It implied that play had to be more intense and pleasurable than the transgressive experience of delinquency. In our present-day stress on safety, the idea of handing children hammers and axes in public playgrounds would be

considered negligent, at best. But in 1946 it was possible for Allen to claim, "even the hammer is an education." The need to intensify the subjective experience of play raised the problem of managing risk. Allen convinced underwriters at Lloyd's to insure the Clydesdale playground by reasoning that children who were deeply engrossed in their own play were less likely to have accidents than those driven by boredom to use conventional playground equipment in ways it was never intended.⁴³ Allen critiqued functionalism as too rigid to accommodate the agency and will of the user, claiming that imposing authority from without through the design of the play object inevitably led to resistance. The stress on context rather than essence provides an alternative political reading of the experimental nature of the adventure playground. If human behavior was not predetermined by human nature or laws of history, but derived empirically in relation to a situation, then everything became dependent on how the event was set up. The playground assumed the status of an experiment.

This led English critics in the 1960s to regard the adventure playground as a political experiment. For Colin Ward, a left-wing activist and urban theorist, the adventure playground provided a demonstration of how subjects govern themselves when they are not "controlled, directed, or limited." To Ward, it provided an "experimental verification" of the feasibility of an alternative social order in which the absence of external rules and authority allows a more egalitarian and democratic order to arise organically out of the needs of the situation. The playground community was seen as a

“free society in miniature,” a demonstration that the demand for the “free access to the means of production” was realizable.⁴⁴ This discourse conveniently disregarded the crucial role of the play leader in making anarchy work and the usefulness of anarchy in making the interiority of the subjects observable and known.

Play Practices: The Indirect Method of Governing Subjectivity

The two practices of anarchy just discussed—the libertarian and the psychoanalytic—are rooted in different conceptions of human nature and citizenship. However, they both illuminate the strategy of power implicit in the adventure playground in which the internal resources of subjects and their propensity for play are mobilized to constitute their subjectivity. Jack Lambert, a seasoned English play leader, provided a frank account of the use of indirect power to pursue social aims: “One of the great paradoxes in the art of playing with children is that you know you are doing well when you are doing nothing. Doing nothing is one of the hardest things of all. . . . I felt I succeeded in Welwyn because by that time I had found ways of building in controls without the children recognizing them as such. They felt free.”⁴⁵

It is not that play leaders do nothing. In that case, they would be redundant. In 1955, play leaders, meeting at a professional conference, defined the adventure playground “as children, a site and a play leader. The play leader makes all the difference. He is the humanizing element, the person who brings the whole thing to

life.”⁴⁶ The role of the play leader is to be there, as his or her mere presence provides the legitimization for children to act out their desires, their imagination, and become active citizens. Their employment of power is much more subtle, since it is predicated on activating rather than limiting children’s agency. The ideal is never to say “no” in order that the child would not identify the play leader with parental or pedagogical authority, but would adopt the modern project of self-betterment as its own.

The significance of making play an object of observation and knowledge rather than a subject of direct intervention is demonstrated by Lambert’s account of the techniques he developed to deal with aggression. Lambert stated his dilemma in terms of how to accommodate the inclusive and nonauthoritarian ethos of the playground to the problem of rough kids who bully weaker children and destroy their creative work. At first, Lambert expelled them from the playground, after moralizing and reasoning failed. The act of exclusion in itself produced resistance and retaliation, expressed in the dramatic destruction of the playground, and it kept out those who needed it the most. In the next playground he managed, Lambert developed a technique for incorporating the lads, as he called them, by insisting on addressing them as individuals, since “most kids need the gang identity to give them confidence to be aggressive and violent.”⁴⁷ He then positioned them as helpers with responsibility for managing playground activity. Another technique was to adjust organized play to their interests. Lambert provided an account of a “rough” group he was compelled expel from the

playground. He followed them home and observed their intense interest in a broken scooter they were unable to fix. He initiated a scooter club, where the lads salvaged and fixed discarded scooters. This activity became the central attraction of the playground, demonstrating that the openness of the playground to children's interests and what they find pleasurable constituted a productive strategy for allowing social services to penetrate even the most alienated social strata. Inciting children to appropriate and master space, to make it their own—"to identify with it, because it would be theirs"⁴⁸—was intended to attach children at risk to the social body by providing them with a sense of ownership and agency.

Conclusion

The analysis of the adventure playground as a strategy of power and a narrative for reconstruction uncovers the contradictions of the postwar welfare state. The playground was originally part of a utopian project to reconstruct a peaceful and more stable postwar society through policies and practices directed toward each individual child, in his or her capacity as a future citizen. It was predicated upon investing play with the capacity to heal society and purge itself of the wartime manifestation of violence. Postwar society was fascinated with the play of children in ruins and put play on display as a metaphor for regeneration, all the while affirming a tragic and mythical conception of violence as rooted in human nature.

Yet the adventure playground's democratic and participatory model of collectivity, as well as its pacifism, was rooted in a psychological notion of political citizenship. The policy of autonomous free play was predicated on the not-so-liberal notion that society has the right, even the obligation, to know and govern the interiority of its subjects, since social cohesion and stability were deemed dependant on the emotional equilibrium of each individual member.. In this respect, the adventure playground confirms Rose's claim that the welfare state governs subjects from the inside, by inducing them to change their everyday conduct to act as active citizens, ardent consumers, enthusiastic employees, and loving parents, as if they are realizing their own intimate desires.⁴⁹ The playground was one of these institutions where children were made into subjects, precisely because in play they felt themselves to be autonomous and free.



Figure 8.5: Crawley Adventure Playground, 1955.

Notes

- ¹. Principle 7, Declaration of the Rights of the Child, General Assembly Resolution 1386 (XIV), UN doc A/4354 (1959).
- ². John Bertelsen, "The Daily Round on a Junk Playground," Danish Outlook 6.6 (1953): 690.
- ³. In the 1960s, American public opinion was hostile to the conventional playground, and newspapers described it as Neanderthal, hideous, or disgraceful. Michael Gotkin, "The Politics of Play," in Preserving Modern Landscape Architecture, edited by Charles A. Birnbaum (Cambridge, Mass.: Spacemaker Press, 1999), 64.
- ⁴. Galen Craz, The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 192.
- ⁵. David Cohen, The Development of Play (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 32–33.
- ⁶. I draw upon volume 1 of Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), which bears on the topic of conceptualizing liberated play as a confessional strategy of subjectivization. I also build upon Foucault's essay "The Subject and Power," where he states that power, in distinction to violence, is not about dominating or destroying others or taking away freedom, but "a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action." Power is productive, "it incites, it induces, it seduces." See Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, vol. 3, edited by James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 2000), 341.
- ⁷. Nikolas Rose, Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self (London: Routledge, 1990), 32.
- ⁸. Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Planning for Play (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 9.
- ⁹. Noguchi's unrealized "Play Mountain" (1933) established the playground as a sculptural landscape. Van Eyck designed more than 700 playgrounds in Amsterdam from 1947 to 1978, using the formal language of de Stijl. Gotkin, "The Politics of Play," 62; Francis Strauven, "Wasted Pearls in the Fabric of the City," in Aldo van Eyck, the Playgrounds and the City, edited by Liane Lefaiivre and Ingeborg de Roode (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, and Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2002), 66–67.
- ¹⁰. Dewey criticized Froebel's use of geometry in education as the imposition of a priori forms. He wrote that for Froebel, "It is not enough that the circle is a convenient way of grouping children. It must be used, 'because it is a symbol of the collective life of mankind in general.'" John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Free Press, 1966), 58.
- ¹¹. Carl Theodor Sørensen, "Junk Playgrounds," Danish Outlook 4.1 (1951): 314.
- ¹². Bertelsen, "The Daily Round on a Junk Playground," 688.
- ¹³. Petition to the Town Clerk from March 1950, "Clydesdale Road Playground: correspondence and papers 1952–1956," CB 3/310, Public Records Office [PRO hereafter], London.
- ¹⁴. Bertelsen and Vesteregn had been married to one another.
- ¹⁵. John Bertelsen, "Early Experience from Emdrup," in Adventure Playground, edited by Arvid Bengtsson (New York, Praeger, 1972), 20.
- ¹⁶. Bertelsen, "Early Experience from Emdrup," 21, 19.
- ¹⁷. Quoted in Ning de Coninck-Smith, "Children, Play, and Democracy: A Contribution to the Designing of Modern Danish Childhood 1943–1960," paper presented at "Stories for Children, Histories of Childhood," Colloque International du GRAAT, Tours, France, November 2005, 6. This statement had its English equivalent in the 1945 Labour Party election manifesto: "Above all, let us remember that the great purpose of education is to give us individual citizens capable of thinking for themselves." See F.W.S. Craig, ed., British General Election Manifestos 1900–1974 (London: Macmillan, 1975), 129.
- ¹⁸. Coninck-Smith, "Children, Play, and Democracy," 14.
- ¹⁹. It is telling that Allen became aware of the problem upon encountering a group of "institutional children" who "never seemed to join the others in the playground." The absence of play became a signifier for deprivation. Marjory Allen and Mary Nicholson, Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 171.
- ²⁰. In the aftermath of World War I, Save the Children Fund was established as a challenge to the policy of blockading the defeated nations, on the grounds that it had an irreversible effect on the health of children. Save the

Children sponsored the first English junk playground at Camberwell in 1948.

- ²¹. Allen and Nicholson, Memoirs, 205. Emdrup validated Allen's earlier thoughts about playground design. In 1938 Allen delivered a paper, "The Future of Landscape Architecture," where she described a park in Wales where children were allowed to dig and dwell. She posed it as the ideal playground for children, as it made them "blissfully happy and engrossingly occupied." Allen's child-centered conception of play was advanced as part of her program to democratize the profession of landscape architecture as a "national service, affecting the character of our people and even our political democracy." MSS 121/HO/7/1/3, Modern Records Centre [MRC hereafter], Coventry.
- ²². Lady Allen of Hurtwood, "Why Not Use Our Bomb Sites Like This?" Picture Post, November 16, 1946, 26–27.
- ²³. Allen disclosed in a memorandum that Lollard was "well placed for use as a demonstration project, since it is within walking distance, across the river, from the House of Parliament." "Lollard Adventure Playground," MSS 121/AP/3/5/14, MRC.
- ²⁴. The legislation for converting bombed sites into playgrounds was initiated in 1944 by E. H. Keeling in response to the wartime increase in child fatalities in road accidents. "Children's Playgrounds: Local Authorities to Make Suitable Bombed Sites Available 1944–1948," HLG 51/905, PRO.
- ²⁵. The American sociologist Clarence Perry developed the concept of the neighborhood unit in the 1920s to constitute self-sufficient communities, in which the size and layout of residential development was determined by the centrality of services catering to the family, especially the school. English planners applied the concept in postwar new towns and housing estates.
- ²⁶. Max Lock, "The Middlesbrough Experiment: Planning from Within," in Architects' Yearbook 2, edited by Jane Drew (London: Elek, 1947), 41. Emphasis in the original.
- ²⁷. George Burden, "The Junk Playground: An Educational Adjunct and an Antidote to Delinquency," The Friend 1029 (December 3, 1948): 4.
- ²⁸. The university settlement movement provided an institutional framework for the middle class to study the realities of urban poverty while offering the working classes educational and cultural programs. According to

Timmins, the English welfare state was the intellectual product of the settlement movement: William Beveridge, Clement Atlee, and Richard Tawney all served at Toynbee Hall. Nicholas Timmins, The Five Giants: A Biography of the Welfare State (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 12.

- ²⁹. Walter Wood, a barrister and play theoretician, stated, "Women have not the civic virtues of loyalty and surrender of self to a common cause. . . . Civilisation however, is coming to require more and more the civic virtues from women, and this is one reason why we should encourage team games amongst adolescent girls." Walter D. Wood, Children's Play and Its Place in Education (London: Kegan Paul, 1915), 187.
- ³⁰. With the institution of the juvenile court system in 1907, the first probation officers were recruited from play center workers. Kevin Brehony, "A Socially Civilizing Influence? Play and the Urban 'Degenerate,'" Paedagogica Historica 39.1/2 (2003): 103.
- ³¹. Claire Valiér, "Psychoanalysis and Crime in Britain during the Inter-War Years," in Selected Papers from the 1995 British Criminology Conference, Loughborough, vol. 1, edited by Jon Vagg and Tim Newburn (September 1998), 6–7.
- ³². Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (New York: Norton, 1989), 16.
- ³³. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham, War and Children ([New York]: Medical War Books, 1943), 24.
- ³⁴. The sociologist D. C. Marsh argued in retrospect that the statistical rise in delinquency was caused by wartime intolerance toward minor infractions of public order, rather than any real surge in criminal acts. D. C. Marsh, The Changing Social Structure of England and Wales (London; Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965), 257–259.
- ³⁵. Marie Paneth, Branch Street: A Sociological Study (London: Allen & Unwin, 1944), 35. Paneth was influenced by August Aichhorn, an Austrian who introduced psychoanalysis into the institutional treatment of delinquents. Aichhorn allowed his subjects to act out their aggressiveness to the point of explosion, since "when this point came, the aggression changed its character. The outbreaks of rage against each other were no longer genuine, but were acted out for our benefit." August Aichhorn, Wayward Youth (London: Imago, 1951), 175.
- ³⁶. Paneth, Branch Street, 120.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ . John Welshman, "Evacuation, Hygiene, and Social Policy: The Our Towns Report of 1943," Historical Journal 42.3 (1999), 806. Allen was a member of the committee.

³⁹ . "Slum Life in Cities: Social Conditions Revealed by Evacuation," Times, March 29, 1943, 5; "Mr. Churchill on Post-War Policy: Four Year's Plan for Britain," Times, March 22, 1943, 5.

⁴⁰ . "Town Life at its Worst: Social Problems of the Immediate Future," Times Educational Supplement, July 29, 1944, 362.

⁴¹ . Peter C. W. Gutkind, "Report to Clydesdale Road Playground Committee," entry from May 13, 1952. MSS 121/AP/3/2/7, MRC.

⁴² . Burden, "The Junk Playground," 4.

⁴³ . Allen, Memoirs, 243.

⁴⁴ . Colin Ward, "Adventure Playground: A Parable of Anarchy," Anarchy 7 (September 1961): 194, 201 This issue was dedicated to the adventure playground.

⁴⁵ . Jack Lambert, Adventure Playgrounds: A Personal Account of a Play-leader's Work as Told to Jenny Pearson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), 65.

⁴⁶ . National Playing Fields Association, "Play Leadership on Adventure Playgrounds," April 27, 1955. CB 1/67, PRO.

⁴⁷ . Lambert, Adventure Playgrounds, 112.

⁴⁸ . Lambert, Adventure Playgrounds, 56.

⁴⁹ . Rose, Governing the Soul, 258.