REVISIONING CHILDHOOD, NATURE, AND THE CITY

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Résumé

La culture occidentale a historiquement séparé les notions de nature et de ville, et depuis le XVIIIe elle associe enfant et nature. Les aménageurs et planificateurs ont suivi en déplaçant beaucoup d'enfants dans la nature passive des villes nouvelles et des quartiers périphériques. Une étude qui compare les souvenirs des personnes âgées et les points de vue de jeunes d'aujourd'hui dans une communauté urbaine et rurale du Kentucky remet en question cette dichotomie. Une séparation entre nature et ville n'est ni historiquement précise, ni dans l'esprit des préférences des enfants, ni encore en accord avec les besoins d'un futur viable.

Summary

Western culture has historically separated notions of nature and the city, and since the eighteenth century, it has associated children with nature. Planners and designers have complied by moving many children into the passive nature of new towns and suburbs. A study which compared the memories of the old and the contemporary perspectives of the young in a Kentucky urban and rural community challenged this dichotomy. A separation of nature and the city is neither historically precise, nor in the spirit of children's preferences, nor in keeping with the needs of a sustainable future.

Can Children and Nature Be Urban?

In his introduction, "The Urban Child," Kaj Noschis[1] suggests that "there is no place for children" in our cities "because cities are not for children." In Judeo-Christian tradition, cities have been associated with Babel, with secular opportunism, danger, temptation, and sin. Since the late eighteenth century, children have been associated

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[1] (*Architecture & Behaviour*, 10 (1994) 4, 343-350).

with carnal and spiritual innocence and with nature. Therefore when planners, designers, and politicians have not themselves been preoccupied by the temptations of Babel, and they have given thought to children, they have attempted to move them out into the domesticated but untilled nature of the suburbs.

Children, however, have remained in the city; and as Noschis points out, more than half of the world's people will live in cities by the end of this century. Therefore he advocates that we do away with "the association of children with nature." If we admit children into the city, he suggests, perhaps we would also make room for gods.

Historical studies, nevertheless, have taken children's presence in the city seriously. Colin Ward (1978), Cary Goodman (1979), David Nasaw (1985), Ning de Coninck-Smith (1990), and Sandy Gaster (1991) have charted children's changing lives in major industrial cities of Europe and the United States during the course of the twentieth century. All of these studies converge in identifying a decline in multigenerational street life and an increasing segregation of spaces for children in playgrounds, schools, and recreation centers.

This paper reports on a project that began by challenging the status of this research as a specifically "urban" history, and the dichotomy between urban and rural childhoods that, as Noschis correctly observes, characterizes Western consciousness since at least the eighteenth century. The project concluded by suggesting that we do not need to disassociate children from nature in order to admit them into the city, because an urban-rural dichotomy is neither historically precise, nor in harmony with children's present preferences and future needs.

Visioning backwards

The project reported here --"Childhood in Kentucky, 1900 to Now"-- can be described as an example of "visioning backwards." In contemporary United States planning, the process of visioning invites local residents to describe what they want their community to look like in 20 or 50 years, and then to backcast how to reach this goal. This future vision is necessary, but how can planning move intelligently into the future unless it assesses the historical forces that have altered places' form and use, and the past possibilities that localities once supported? To expand the potential of the future, it is important to understand the past.

The "Childhood in Kentucky" project was based on the premise that children's community experience is a topic that can make this history accessible to people of all ages and walks of life, and that can bridge past and future. It brought together the memory of adults and the contemporary perspective of the young, with the goals of identifying local changes, relating change to the needs of families and children, and reassimilating past possibilities into planning for the future. In the terms of Noschis (1992), it attempted to awaken a dialogue between the inner child and the real child.

The "Childhood in Kentucky" project explored resources for children in Portland, an old urban working-class community on the Ohio River in Louisville, and 35 miles away in New Castle, county seat of rural Henry County in the outer Bluegrass region. To relate past, present, and future, the project gathered information through three means: *oral histories* with past and present residents who grew up in these communities between 1900 and 1960; *archival research* that reviewed old maps, newspapers, and written reminiscence; *community evaluations* by local nine and ten year olds. The project's method and findings have already been reported in some detail in articles on the project's rural and urban components (Chawla, 1994, 1995).

An urban and rural community were compared in order to explore the following questions: What changes in twentieth-century children's lives are distinctively urban? What is rural? What changes transcend our rural-urban dichotomy? This paper will briefly summarize some key findings from urban Portland, compare them to New Castle results, and discuss implications for how we associate childhood, nature, and the city, as researchers and as design professionals.

Growing up in Portland : 1900-1950

As the name Portland suggests, the community began in the early 1800s as a stopping point for boats coming up the Ohio River, where they unloaded passengers and cargo for land transport past the rapids of the Falls of the Ohio. In 1830, the Louisville & Portland Canal was built, becoming a new channel for river transport, although the wharves continued to function into the twentieth century. After annexation to Louisville in 1852, Portland gained a streetcar yard and large rail yard. These economies of river and rail supported factories, warehouses, many small businesses, and, on the community's western edge, still-operating remnants of orchards and farms. Every few blocks, there was a commons where people grazed delivery horses or gardened.

This mosaic of land uses combined with a social mosaic, in which the well-to-do lived in imposing Italianate and Victorian homes on the main avenue, the working class in shotgun homes on secondary streets, African-American families in blocks of extended kin scattered around the community, poor whites and African-Americans in the alleys, and the poorest families in a shanty town by the wharves.

In this integration of diverse land uses and social groups, Portland was characteristic of other old "walking industrial" communities built when interdependent classes and services had to be located in proximity (Bartelt & al., 1987). In its racial integration, it was also characteristic of other old Southern cities in the United States, where geographic segregation remained low into the twentieth century (Massey & Denson, 1993).

What were the consequences for children? For one, nature and commerce co-existed, and children penetrated both settings: commons and quarries, overgrown river banks and canal locks, tree lined avenues and rail yard, orchard and corner grocery, parks and local dump.

By all reports, parents accepted that "boys will be boys": riding river currents (and sometimes drowning), jumping box cars, or exploring the quarry, even when these sites were forbidden. Through the 1930s, girls swam in the river at a Sand Island beach or in the canal locks. Traveling in groups and accounting for their time, many girls moved widely through the community through the 1950s. As a consequence of the diffusion of African-American families throughout the community, children often formed racially integrated play groups.

Children's free range throughout the community was facilitated by several social factors. Memories of the first half of the century confirm the judgment of David Nasaw (1985, 4) that this period was the golden age of urban childhood, when the young enjoyed "more unstructured and unsupervised free time than the generations that preceded or followed them." Freed from nineteenth-century toil in factories, and not yet programmed into T.V., Nintendo, or Little League, young Portlanders scouted out entertainment on their feet.

A general network of protective (and sometimes proscriptive) adult surveillance gave parents and children a sense of security (and daredevil boys a reason to seek out-of-sight places). Takeover of the streets for play was made easy by light traffic and the fact that those under 18 composed a higher proportion of the population (42% of Kentucky's population in 1900 versus 26% in 1990--and these figures are representative of the nation).

In addition to infiltrating workplaces and appropriating streets and green places, young Portlanders benefitted from the efforts of social reformers who were convinced that children (especially boys) needed to be taught civilized play, and who provided church socials, a Boy's Club, a neighborhood center and gym, and staffed summer park programs. All in all, Portland oral histories resurrect the vivid "childscape" of diverse, intimately known places that, as the geographer J. Douglas Porteous (1990) has noted, characterized "the time before"--before postwar change--in both urban neighborhoods and rural towns.

Contemporary children's perspectives

In this "time before," children's lives in an urban village like Portland and a rural county seat like New Castle were more similar than different. New Castle children too felt themselves to be at the center of things. Families of sharecropper and independent farmer alike came into town for free movies in the courthouse square on summer Thursday evenings, and for shopping and socializing on Saturday mornings. Prosperous and poor vacationed on the nearby Kentucky River. Adults were hawk-eyed, and quick to report the worst to parents, but also tolerant of children's presence everywhere.

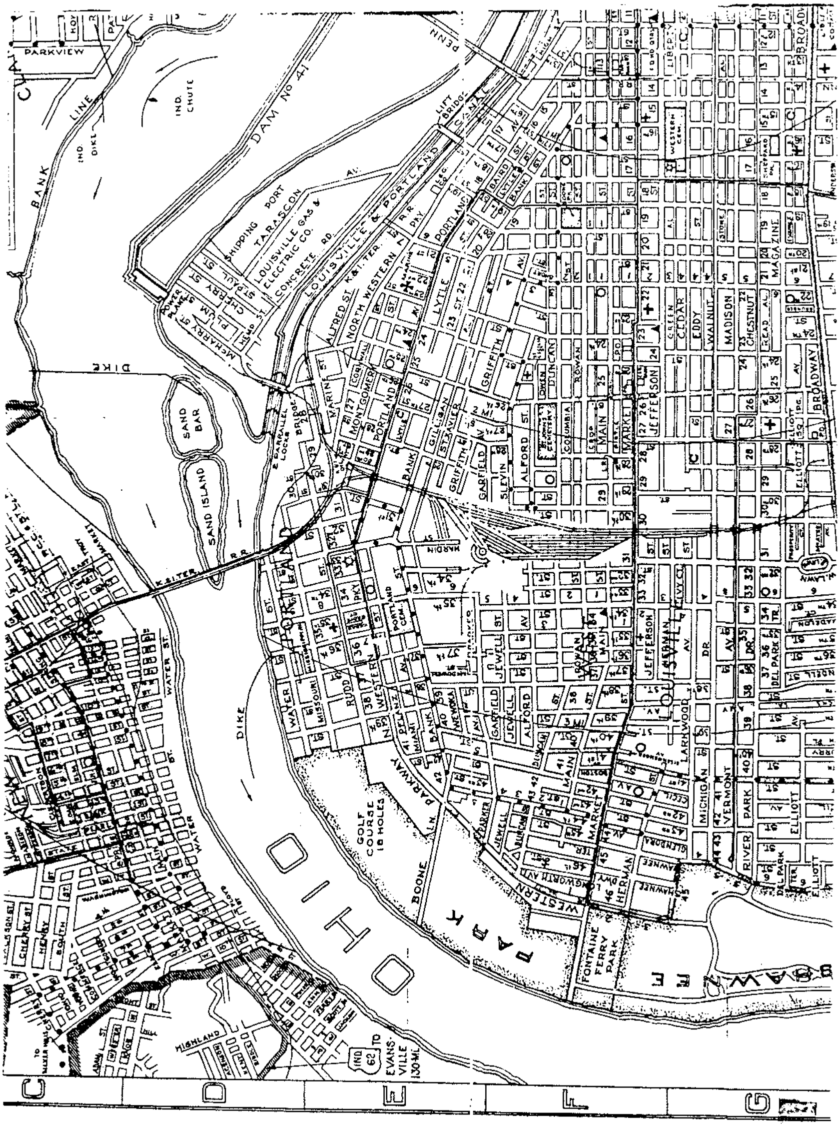

Fig.1. Portland circa 1935, when its inhabitants still enjoyed access to the river, Sand Island, and Shippingport Island. By 1960, a flood wall embankment and Interstate Highway 64 had cut the community off from its riverfront heritage. Map courtesy of Charlie Coddington.

Fig. 2. Portland river rats, circa 1915. Until construction of a flood wall embankment in 1940, all ages frequented the banks of the Ohio River for swimming, strolling, and picnicking. Picture courtesy of Viola Becker and the Portland Museum.

How do these communities function for children today? Distinct as this urban corner of 15,000 and this rural town of 850 are, they have suffered parallel processes of change. Both show the effects of systematic postwar disinvestment in old working-class communities, urban or rural, as both places have lost vitality to the subdivisions, shopping malls, industrial parks, and office complexes that continue to expand on Louisville's eastern edge. Interstate Highway 71 now bypasses New Castle, and Interstate 64 runs along the Ohio River, cutting Portland off from its riverfront heritage. When fourth graders in the Portland Elementary School and New Castle Elementary School where asked what they liked best about where they lived, and what they wanted to improve, their answers reflected this history.

When children drew and wrote about their favorite places, their first and second choices were identical in both communities: most frequently, a park or green place among trees or bushes; and secondly, their own room. When asked, "What is the best thing about your community?" almost half of the students in both places identified friendly people and peace and quiet.

When asked to suggest improvements, answers differed. Portland students wanted drugs and crime controlled, trash cleaned up, and no more trees cut down. They were probably not aware that they were desiring prewar conditions, when drugs and crime were rare, when people took pride in their neat yards and sidewalks, and when double rows of great trees lined the avenues. New Castle students wanted more stores and more places for children to meet: again, probably not aware that town businesses now number only two-thirds of their 1940s level, and that the county's small towns were once magnets and meeting places.

These values conform to those that emerged from Kevin Lynch's international study of *Growing Up in Cities* (1977) and of a generation of child research in cities, suburbs, and small towns (Chawla, 1992). Around the world, children say that they want trees and green places, friendly people, peace, safety, cleanliness, and nearby places where they can meet and feel part of an active center. In other words, they want the basic characteristics of liveable communities.

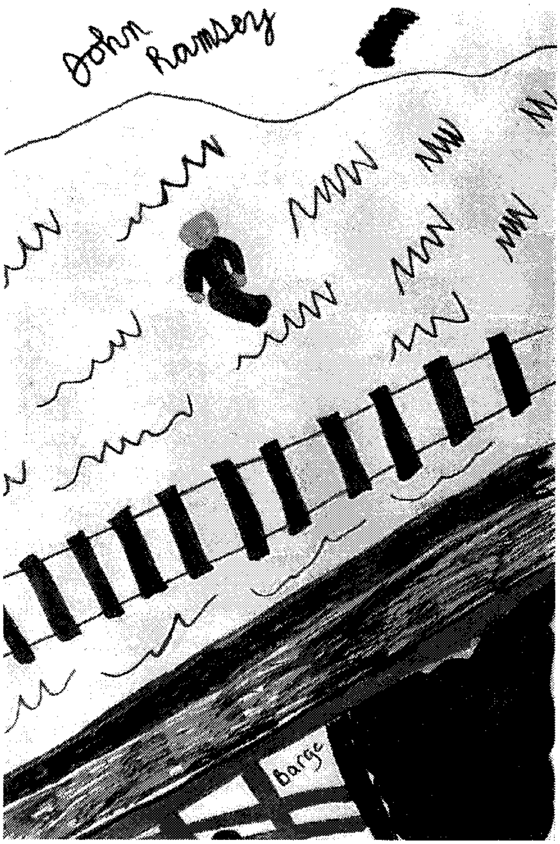

Fig. 3. When nine- and ten-year-olds described their favorite places, their most frequent choice was a green place where they could make quiet or imaginative worlds of their own. A park overlooking the canal locks has been a perennial Portland favorite. Picture by John Ramsey.

Admitting children and nature into cities

In Portland, where river access was cut off, many street trees cut down, and commons, orchard, and farms infilled, children's access to nature had eroded. Contemporary children's preference for the remaining parks and green corners, and their desire to protect remaining trees, suggest that a child-friendly city is one where city and nature mix. In New Castle, children described their appreciation for the fields and woods that remained close at hand, but they also wanted access to stores and meeting places. It appears that what children want is neither nature versus the city, nor the city versus nature, but a union of the two.

We can admit children into the city without doing away with the association of children with nature, because it appears that children have never accepted the dichotomy between city and nature that adults have attempted to enforce. Nor is this dichotomy an accurate reflection of prewar life in many old city quarters and rural towns.

Nor is this dichotomy in the best interests of children's future. If planners, designers, and politicians are going to commit themselves to the creation of sustainable cities, for the sake of their children and their children's children, then nature as well as children must be admitted into the city. The riverbanks need to be reopened, the commons restored, trees replanted, rich and poor of all races integrated, and the compact pedestrian scale of old communities like Portland made attractive once again. On this point, visions of the past and visions of the future coincide.

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