



THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
A Second Level Interdisciplinary Course
Art and Environment

play and place: transforming environments

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Before reading these programme notes it would be particularly valuable to reflect for a few moments upon any special places you had as a child and to jot down some notes for yourself. Were any of these places found or made by you? In what physical environment(s) were these places? What qualities made them special? What value do you think they might have offered in your development?

PLAYBILL

Overture

Act One Vermont, United States of America

A small town in the Green Mountains of Vermont (population approximately 1000)

Scene One The Homes Across the River

Scene Two The Model Town

Scene Three The Fern House

Intermission

Act Two Leicestershire, United Kingdom

On the edge of a town in north-west Leicestershire (population approximately 30 000)

Scene One The Tree House

Scene Two The Den

Scene Three The Cave

Finale

Behind the scenes

OVERTURE

Each of us has come to know the environment and ourselves through an active process; as infants, through the developing activity of our bodies, and our perceptual systems, and later through the exercises of our minds, including the imagination. The personal interactive history each of us has had with the environment therefore influences the way we experience self and the environment in later life. The two are inextricably intertwined. This programme is concerned with just one aspect of children's interaction with environment: the making of places, and the symbolic use of those places in play. These programme notes have been designed to provide background information on the scenes and characters of the film, and to lead to further reflection on the values of play, the physical environmental qualities which children favour, and some of the environmental planning considerations which must be made in the development of new, and the improvement of old, residential areas.

The process of play in children is the same as the process involved in artistic activity in adults (cf. the television programme 'Having Ideas by Handling Materials'). By artistic activity I do not mean only the production of finished physical artifacts, for it also includes our everyday creative acts of perception. As individuals we are able to re-create the physical world not only with our

hands but also through the activity of our senses and imagination. This film is concerned with both physical and imaginative modification of the environment by children. It is unfortunate that as adults we too easily accept the environment as given, and immutable, and rarely manipulate it, through physical or imaginative play. To understand the reason for this we only need to reflect upon our formal education. In art classes the emphasis is so often upon copying things and the styles of others. We are also told that art is what occurs in the classroom or at home on a sketch pad and that everything else in our play is irrelevant to art. But such attitudes are not limited to art classes. More generally in school we are informed of a world that is given rather than one under transformation. In this way we are lead into a relatively passive rather than an interactive relationship with the environment.

It is not the intent of this film to have you bathe in romanticism, nor yearn for childhood as many persons longingly do. Rather, it should serve as a reminder of the kind of space we might allow ourselves to occupy more often – a space lying somewhere between the so-called objective environment (the shared reality we have with others) and our own inner psychic reality. It is not then that some of us are artists and some of us are not; it is just that most of us have forgotten how to play.

ACT ONE - VERMONT, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Location: A small town in the Green Mountains of Vermont (population – approximately 1000)

Act 1, Scene 1 The Homes Across the River

Location:

A wooded river bank across the major highway and the river from the home of a family of seven children.

Set:

During the film, only two of the seven rooms are shown in any detail. These rooms have changed hands many times and their layout and contents have been continually modified. The inset of the sketch plan was made by an older sister who no longer uses any of the rooms. It illustrates the detail of two rooms in 1973. I have sketched in the other rooms approximately, to give some idea of the layout of this labyrinth-like 'bower'. In the film most action centres around 'Sylvia's house', where the garden is re-planted and where the television is made, and 'Johanne's house', which

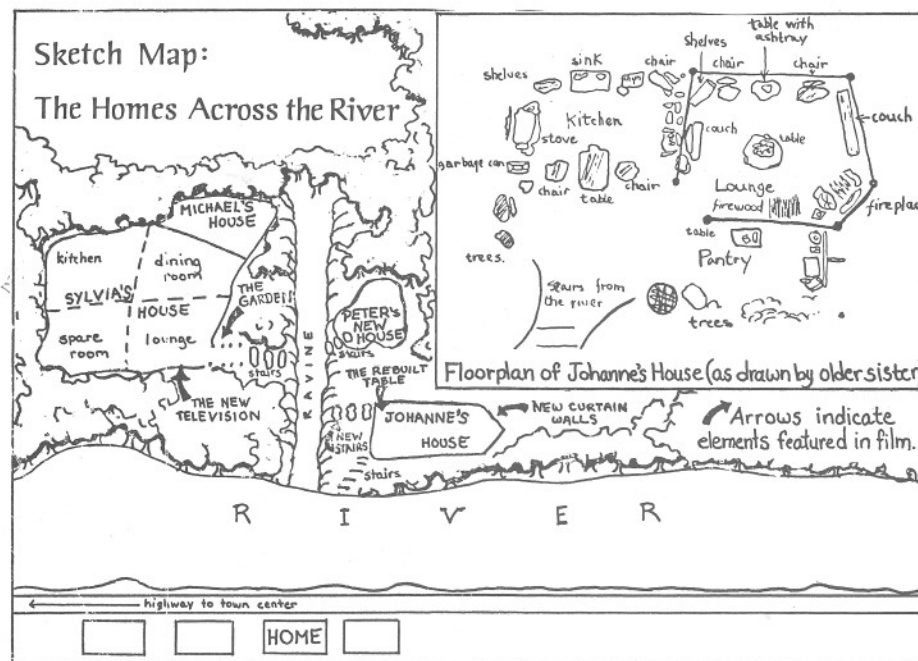
we see being re-built with curtain walls and furnished with a table after being deserted by an older sister.

Cast: (in order of appearance):

Johanne – 13 years, Sylvia – 12 years,
Michael – 4 years, Peter – 10 years

Props:

About 16 stone chairs, 5 stone tables, sufficient material for 12 walls (branches and old sheets), 12 planks for shelves, 4 fireplaces and plentiful firewood, 2 stone stoves, 1 hammock slung between trees, 3 couches (from salvaged railroad sleepers), 5 garbage cans, 2 sinks, 3 brooms made of branches, 2 rakes, 1 television – cardboard, 1 clock – metal, 1 clock – cardboard, assorted kitchen utensils and containers, ashtrays, flower vases, drawing materials, etc.





Act 1, Scene 2 The Model Town

Location:
Beneath the maple tree in front of a house on Main Street. Here the dirt is just right, there is good shade, and the children can see and be seen by other children.

Cast (in order of appearance):
Timmy - 7 years, Vince - 10 years,
Shawn - 9 years, Lisa - 8 years

Props:
'Good dirt' with 'sticky' qualities. Good sharp digging instrument - a teaspoon from the kitchen is the most popular. Flat piece of stick for scraping highways. These should not be manufactured scrapers, because much value seems to be placed upon finding one *each* time that is great for the job. Assorted trucks for transporting dirt, sticks and other building

materials. Water for making dry dirt 'just right' for building. Blocks and dolls houses are an optional extra, as buildings are usually made from the dirt. Cars and planes etc., for acting out dramas on the staged landscape.

Act 1, Scene 3 The Fern House

Location:
In the ferns of a hemlock wood about one furlong from the Grandmother's home, outside of town.

Cast:
Andrew - 6 years, Jenny - 4 years

Props:
2 fern beds, 2 fern pillows, 2 leaf seats, 3 pretend doorways, 2 pretend sets of breakfast utensils, 2 pretend cars



INTERMISSION

Act 1 – Vermont, United States of America

The subject matter of the Vermont film is extracted from my larger study prepared for a doctoral dissertation in geography at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. The purpose of the dissertation is to describe the landscape of one town as it comes to exist for all of its children: that is, the development of children's exploration, use, knowledge and feelings for the landscape.

My first year of observation revealed how often children engaged in transforming the environment. Though I began to give special emphasis in my observations and records to these activities, I was careful not to spend undue time or show exaggerated interest in it while with the children, for fear of influencing their behaviour. I returned to film it with John Marshall in the summer of 1975, two years after the dissertation research.

Many adults see in children's play its amusement value only, and therefore consider it frivolous and unimportant, especially in adult life. It is not. There are many theories of play and its significance in human development. Taken singly, no one of these theories adequately explains the rich diversity and benefits of play or even accounts for the constructive and imaginative play captured in this film. Taken together, however, these theories suggest some of the many psychological and social values that ensue from constructive and imaginative play. One of the better-known theories stresses play's merit in the learning of adult roles. This can be clearly seen in Act 1, Scene 1. The modelling of adult roles is well illustrated in the different constructions and play activities of the two boys and two girls in this scene. Peter, the eldest brother, had not worked on the house during its five years of construction until the time of this film. He offered to assist in order to be included in the film. His construction play is usually with dams, bridges, a garden, and a tree fort. His younger brother Michael (four years) has only

recently begun to construct at all: but already we can see in the film the influence of role modelling as he chops trees arbitrarily! Some other specific functions of dramatic play that may be recognized in this and later film sequences are the opportunity to reverse roles and to act out real-life situations in an intense way, to express pressing personal needs and explore solutions.

I believe there are qualities to this kind of play beyond those of modelling the adult world. First, there is the satisfaction which ensues from the sense of being able to transform the environment successfully – the development of a sense of personal competence. Second, there is the comfort in being able to make a place for oneself; ordering the physical world assists in the development of a sense of personal order.

The second sequence of film documents another model environment, this time one reduced to micro-scale. The town which the children are shown building in Scene 2 is the kind of setting which children commonly create for their play with toys. In Vermont this usually occurs in dirt or sand; in England we commonly find it in driveways and street gutters or with shoeboxes, dolls and toy cars in living rooms. Not surprisingly, boys when playing together make airports and towns such as this one, while girls more often make houses and decorate interiors.* In both cases children are mapping environments, experienced or imagined. Toy play offers the opportunity to reduce in scale environments too large to be experienced by children directly. Act 1, Scene 2, where we see Lisa and Timmy moving house, clearly illustrates how this kind of play can offer a superb opportunity for children to assimilate new knowledge and to re-work existing notions of the

* For a discussion of the significance of such differences in the behaviour of boys and girls to their development see Susan Saegert and Roger Hart, 'Sex differences in the environmental competence of children' in P. Burnett (ed.) *Women in Society*, Maaroufa Press, forthcoming.

macro-environment.* Also, as in Scene 1, this modelling activity offers the opportunity for children to deal with emotional conflict by symbolizing phenomena and dealing with them through manipulation in a manner that is not possible in the everyday social world with adults. No doubt it is because this activity is so familiar to children and so valuable to them that psychoanalysts have formalized it into a diagnostic technique. In the 'small worlds' method, a child is offered a wide variety of toys and building materials. By observing and interpreting the building of miniature landscapes and the acting out of dramas in these settings, the psychoanalyst obtains valuable diagnostic insights. As Winnicott has aptly remarked, 'The natural thing is playing, and the highly sophisticated twentieth-century phenomenon is psychoanalysis.†

Scene 3 again involves the making of a place and the acting out of a drama but this time the modification of the environment is largely

* For further discussion of the development of children's knowledge of the environment see an extension of Piaget's ideas on spatial cognition to the large-scale environment in R. Hart and G. T. Moore (1974) 'The development of spatial cognition: A review' in R. Downs and D. Stea (eds.) *Image and Environment*, Arnold. For specific discussion of the role of toys in place learning see D. Stea and J. Blaut (1974) 'Notes toward a developmental theory of spatial learning', also in *Image and Environment*.

† D. W. Winnicott (1971) *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock (Penguin edn, 1974).

imaginative. This is common with younger children, reminding us that while children like to construct physical sets for their dramatic play, this is by no means necessary. When we visited the Fern House with Andrew and Jenny, they rebuilt their fern beds and pillows, and leaf seats which had dried out since last they played there, but we were unable to show on film the imagined doors and windows of this house. These invisible props become very real in play and the children remind one another very quickly if one walks through a wall! It is necessary to watch and listen very closely in order to enter a little into Andrew's and Jenny's imaginative place, for in this scene, even more than the others, the children were not moving for our camera or speaking to our microphone.

Each of the three scenes of Act 1 serves as a reminder of how much of children's play is imaginative. While none of the theories of play I have mentioned are alone sufficient to explain the rich diversity of play; taken together they help us to understand some of the values of occupying a space of imagination; a space lying somewhere between the objective shared reality we have with others and our own inner psychic reality. It is to this space in the imagination that we all go whenever we wish to be creative, to see the world afresh. The children have also demonstrated to us by the quality of their involvement, how important to them is both construction, and the opportunity to find and make places for themselves. With this in mind, we chose for our second act to visit a British suburban housing estate and document the places of their play.



ACT TWO - LEICESTERSHIRE, UNITED KINGDOM

Location: On the edge of a town in north-west Leicestershire (population - approximately 30 000)

Act 2, Scene 1 The Tree House

Location:

A large oak tree in a hedgerow of one of the two fields lying between the school and the two housing estates.

Cast:

Gary - 10 years, Roderick - 10 years, Neal - 10 years, Neil - 9 years, Nicola - 10 years

Props:

1 large length of rope, assorted 'waste' planks, piece(s) of plywood, hammers and nails

Act 2, Scene 2 The Den

Location:

A tunnel formed from an overgrown hedgerow with trees in the same field as the tree house of Scene 1.

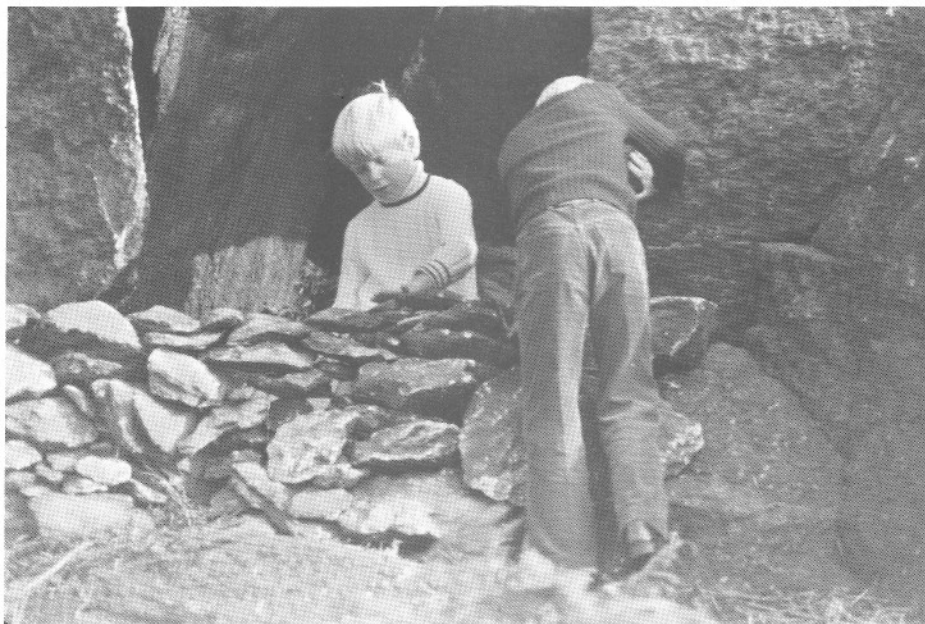
Cast:

Dawn - 8 years, Denise - 9 years, Michelle - 8 years, Jane - 8 years, Ruth - 9 years, Beverley - 9 years, Shandy, Beverley's dog - 1 year

Props:

1 chair, 1 tablecloth, 1 bucket, pieces of plywood for table, planks, reeds for plaiting walls and making rope





Act 2, Scene 3 The Cave House

Location:

A pile of ancient volcanic rocks surrounded by bracken on a high point of Charnwood Forest. This conserved heath, now devoid of trees, looks out over Coalville, the housing estates and the school, lying a mile away.

Cast:

Philip – 9 years, Robert – 10 years

Props:

Rocks for making rooms, cupboards, toilet, greenhouse, etc. Bracken and turf for filling in holes of roof. Bracken for the floor.

FINALE

In order to discover the extent to which English children have a desire to modify the environment and make places for themselves we decided to visit a fairly typical middle-income housing estate. This particular estate was chosen because it was both close to my family's home, and convenient to the London-based BBC film operations, and because the school had an open-minded staff, who were likely to understand the intent of our film and its relevance to children's development. I had no prior familiarity with the children of Warren Hills School and had only a week or two to become familiar with them before filming. Unlike my Vermont research, I asked the children specifically to show me any places they had built or were building. The three places filmed in Act 2 were discovered through my meetings with the children during my first two days in the school. During the following two weeks I visited dozens of similar places.

In Scene 1, three boys and a girl are involved in the early stages of building a tree house. Apparently, a roof for this house had been attempted by Roderick, one of the members of the group, but after taking reeds home from the pond (cf. Scene 2) and working for a week or so, he was still having difficulty with this project. Tree houses are an extremely common phenomenon in the suburban United States, but are relatively rare in the United Kingdom.* Like almost all of the construction by children from these housing estates, this tree house has been built on one of the two adjacent unused fields. The reasons for this choice of location are easy to identify. Most of the trees around the actual housing estates are recently planted small shade trees; varieties selected for their aesthetic qualities which will never be suitable for any kind of play,

*The most likely explanation for this is cultural rather than environmental. It lies simply in the different standard notions of what parents provide for their children on the different sides of the Atlantic. Commonly in the United States of America tree houses are at least started by the father for their sons; similarly 'Wendy' or club houses are often built for daughters.

even if their landowners (parents) allowed it. More mature trees were preserved on these estates than is often the case in new developments, but this was clearly for their aesthetic value only, a fact emphasized by the cutting of the lower limbs to a height well above that of one child standing on another's shoulders!

The den of Scene 2 is located just a few hundred yards away from the tree house. Between the two, and in fact in all of the hawthorn hedgerows around these two fields, may be found the burrow-like second homes, called 'dens', of children from all parts of the surrounding estates. Many of these dens are used at different times by different groups of children, but still they are considered 'secret'. This results in frequent intrigues and complaints regarding wrecking and stealing. It is worth while reflecting on some of the qualities of these fields and hedgerows in order to grasp why so much of the free time of children over six or seven years of age is spent here rather than in the playgrounds, 'play areas' (small flat areas of mown grass scattered throughout the estates) or back gardens of the homes. One of these qualities seems to be the freedom to choose their own play places. Play areas and playgrounds are prescribed places for children; these fields are not. At the time of filming, these fields were free for children or anyone to use as they chose, much like common land used to be. Fortunately, due to a traditional land ethic which values freedom of access, and an enlightened 'green belt' planning policy, there are still many such fields for the children of British towns and suburbs. This freedom of use contrasts with the estates' athletic fields and playgrounds, where the environment demands, through its facilities and equipment, rather specific uses, and with the planned 'play areas' and house gardens where both planners and parents have so manicured the settings with lawns, untouchable trees, and flower beds that they offer little freedom of use. Another distinguishing quality of these fields is the presence of suitable places in which to build (trees, bushes, and long grass) and suitable loose parts to use in this building (leaves, grass, reeds,

and various junked objects – pieces of carpet, house bricks), though it seems that many of these were brought to the site by the children themselves. A further valuable quality is that these fields are sufficiently far away from the children's homes to be considered 'secret' by the children and unknown to anyone but the friends of the moment, yet sufficiently close for many parents to feel that they could find their children in an emergency by sending an elder brother or sister. All of these qualities combine to make these small fields the most popular play places for the children of these estates.

One enlightened response to planning for children in Scandinavia and England has been the adventure playgrounds, where children are able to build their own places with all kinds of loose parts.* These playgrounds meet many of the qualities which children value in these fields, by providing them in concentrated form on an acre or so of land. While this has been one superb approach to improving the quality of environmental opportunities for children in the cities, it is by no means a total solution. It fails to meet the needs of younger children in the cities, whose range of free movement is so small that they must find suitable play places very close to home. One solution for them is for parents to take some initiative towards providing a rich play environment in and around the house; one in which children can find opportunities to transform things and their uses instead of just learning to use single-purpose toys in their prescribed manner. Furthermore, adventure playgrounds could never be provided in sufficient numbers to meet the requirements of the vast number of children living in medium-to low-density housing in our towns and suburbs. For them, a more satisfactory and indeed simpler solution would be to formalize what has happened by accident with the Coalville estates –

*For an introduction to adventure playgrounds see Jack Lambert and Jenny Pearson (1974) *Adventure Playgrounds*, Penguin, and Arvid Bengtsson (1973) *Adventure Playgrounds*, Crosby & Lockwood.

the preservation of areas close by housing for use as common lands by children and adults. This land should not be subject to recreational landscaping, for this means the flattening of topography, the culverting of streams, and the removal of bushes, secondary-growth trees and long grass.

If we are to deal with ever-increasing land-use problems in a flexible manner, we must think and plan in a truly ecological way. This must include the recognition of human ecology. From looking at children ecologically we discover that a most important quality of their interaction with the environment involves the finding and making of places for themselves. Leaving some opportunities for adults as well as children to develop a balanced relationship to the environment through their own actions upon it, remains a radical challenge to planners. Presently, environmental planning and design is viewed totally as the business of providing specific places and things for specific functions; one design solution per one design problem. Multi-purpose use, flexible use, and local initiative are some of the necessary planning concepts which have only recently entered the planning vocabulary. Hopefully, as other new estates, like those shown in Act 2, spread across the English landscape, planners will not spell out all the uses of all land in single demarcations of function: this place for walking, this for play, that for this game and so on. Rather, we must hope, some purposes will lie latent, waiting to be discovered.

With regard to children, the responsibility lies not only with planners; parents and school administrators must also leave space and time for children to find and create places for themselves. Children should be encouraged to see themselves as active participants in a world of flux. This is what a future-oriented educational philosophy would do. It would be a philosophy which sees education as the process by which children learn to interact with, and intelligently transform, the environment and themselves.

CURTAIN

Behind the scenes

The incidental music was composed and performed by Ray Lorenzo.

Act 1 was filmed entirely on location in Vermont, United States of America, over several months in the summer of 1975. These sequences form part of a research project initiated by Roger Hart. The cameraman was John Marshall.

Act 2 was filmed in Leicestershire, England, on 16 and 17 September 1975 and this was researched and planned by Roger Hart and Andrew Crilly. The cameraman was Ian Young.

The programme is presented by Roger Hart (Environmental Psychology Program, The Graduate School and University Center, City

University of New York) and produced by Andrew Crilly.

Photographs were taken by the following:
Cover photograph: Roger Hart;
Act 1, Scene 1: sketch map drawn by Roger Hart and one of the children (rendered by Gwen Hamlin); photograph by Roger Hart;
Act 1, Scene 2: Roger Hart;
Act 1, Scene 3: John Marshall;
Act 2, Scene 1: David Sheppard;
Act 2, Scene 2: David Sheppard;
Act 2, Scene 3: Roger Hart.

The programme was only made possible by the generous cooperation of local authorities, parents, teachers and children at both locations. The BBC and the Open University would like to take this opportunity to thank all concerned.