

The Overlaid Life of Places of Play

Mapping the Destinations and In-Betweens of Historical and Contemporary Play¹

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Our Working Understanding of Play, and Play in the Built or Physical Environment

There are many ways to view and understand play. It is generally considered that there might be many potential benefits to playing, such as therapeutic, physical and mental health, skills development and others. Without discounting these potential benefits, for this article we are viewing and discussing play as something that children (and adults) do for fun, for its own sake and because they want to: we are talking about play for the sake of playing. *Play for a Change* presents a perspective on play from Sutton-Smith, describing how children's worlds can be made more exciting and amusing through play.² The idea is put forward that 'what play prepares you for is more play, and what that gives you is more satisfaction in being alive'.

Play is something that comes from people's own actions, rather than being something that happens to them. It is something that people do. The fact that play comes from people themselves may mean that there is an inherent freedom in play, or in the act of playing. Any child or adult can pretend to be a zombie or that they can fly. A child in a buggy might imagine that they are in a spaceship, then create a whole narrative about this. Sutton-Smith said that 'Play is typically a primary place for the expression of anything that is humanly imaginable'.³ If we relate this expression of imagination to the built or physical environment, thinking about these environments in terms of something that children should be able to enjoy and use freely, and the fact that all children play (in some way; everyone may play differently to everyone else), then built or physical environments that support children's play could be viewed as environments that could or should support the freedom that is play itself.

If the built environment could facilitate more playfulness, then adults knowing how to listen to and interpret children's thoughts on the environments that children use could contribute to informing: current and future maintenance, management and development of built or physical environments, whether these are specifically for children (*destination* places) or *in between* places.

A Brief Overview of Adventure Playgrounds

Children play everywhere and anywhere; however, the research project that this article is based on began on a London adventure playground. Adventure playgrounds tend to be located in and around cities. Many of them were created from pieces of land that were previously bomb sites and which were used for play by children. Some of these sites were developed into playgrounds after adults perceived a need for safe places for children to play. From these sites and others, adventure playgrounds evolved where children could come and play, swing, build, climb, make fires, cook, make things, relax and contribute, with the support of adult volunteers or staff. Adventure playgrounds are usually open after school, on weekends and in school holidays, with children aged six to fifteen years old (typically) being able to attend. They are normally staffed by playworkers and are open access, meaning that children can come and go during play sessions as they please. Playworkers are always present in play sessions. Some adventure playgrounds welcome children with disabilities in their sessions. There is a network of adventure playgrounds in the UK that are specifically for children with disabilities and their siblings (some of these playgrounds do not have an open access policy, for safety reasons). There is normally no payment to attend with adventure playgrounds being free at point of entry, although this is currently changing on some playgrounds. Some adventure playgrounds welcome parents during play sessions; in others, parents can only drop off and collect their children and mostly have to stay in the gate or entrance area. Most adventure playgrounds are run by local authorities, charities or play associations. Some are run by parent volunteer groups. There is now one Community Interest Company in the UK that runs play services. Adventure playgrounds usually have indoors and outdoors areas.

Adventure playgrounds are often very much part of their area, by way of personal and community connections. They are not isolated facilities. On some playgrounds, parents spend time, volunteer, socialise, share advice, tell playworkers local news, host events and make new friends with other parents. Adventure playgrounds tend to have the feel of a community hub and sometimes function as this, rather than having the feel of a public service offer.

There is an aspect of open access adventure playgrounds whereby playworkers sometimes see more of children's everyday lives than what goes on inside the playground: the action and interactions that happen around playground entrance gate areas. These gate areas can be placed on busy roads, within parks, in cul-de-sacs or in other types of locations. Some adventure playground gates are kept closed (not locked) to stop dogs running in, or for other reasons such as to discourage the public from wandering in. Some playground gates are kept wide open whilst play sessions are running.

Things that can happen around gates or entrances include: parents with babies and younger children milling around; children who have been told to stay inside the gates (by their parents) talking to people they know outside the gates, maybe friends, teenagers or adults they know who are passing by or waiting for someone outside. Children also play on, around and with physical gates and fences, climbing and decorating them and playing with objects such as greenery and signs. Children sometimes spend lots of time moving in and out of the gate area, which could be interpreted as children playing with and experiencing their physical and geographical independence.

Observations made around the thresholds of gate areas can give playworkers information such as who children know and are comfortable to talk with, how children interact with their wider community and how safe children feel to leave the playground. These kinds of observations tend to be incidental and therefore non-intrusive for children, are made regularly and can happen over very long periods of time (the same playworkers and children continue to work on and attend play sessions over many years). This extended general awareness of children's everyday lives can contribute valuable knowledge to play mapping

exercises such as the one described in this research. Playworkers might use this general knowledge to help create mapping exercises that will have relevance and be understandable for children in this area, or it may just give playworkers some reference points and context for the information that children convey.

The Purpose of Playwork

Playwork is what playworkers practice and do on adventure playgrounds, to run them as such. Our current understanding of playwork is that it exists to offer children time, space and support to play. Playworkers may work on adventure playgrounds, after school clubs, in prisons or doing outreach work in public places. Playworkers on adventure playgrounds prepare materials, are ready to interact with and support children and are there to help organise resources or more things to do if children ask for this. Playwork is not about running play sessions with a time-fixed programme, where children are directed through a series of activities. Ideally, there are lots of resources available for play sessions, including food, toys, tools, musical instruments and many other small and large objects and materials, which children can choose to use how they want. Adventure playgrounds normally have interesting outdoors environments that may include features such as swings, sandpits, fire pits, chill out areas, ponds, wooden play structures, gardens, trees, playhouses, sculptures, plants, sports pitches and others. Playworkers are not there to play with the children, but playworkers do join in with play if invited by the children. It should be up to the children to decide if they want playworkers to join in with their play or not. Playworkers normally aim to establish and maintain non-authoritarian relationships with children, whilst offering children whatever level of psychological, physical and emotional support that children need to be able to play freely.

Gentle and Subtle Listening

Subtle and very attentive listening is an important part of carrying out research with children. Conversations and commentary that children have and make can benefit research by contributing verbal information to the body of knowledge about the artefacts that children create, even though not all these conversations may be recorded or recorded in detail. Gentle and subtle listening may be required to interpret, or try to interpret some of what children say, and to indicate to children that they are being taken seriously and that it is worth them talking further. The more conversations and commentary that children make on the artefacts they create, and the more that this is listened to and understood by adult researchers, the clearer adult understanding will be of children's ideas. Ideally, the least possible meaning-making is needed at the end of the process.

There are some ways in which playworkers (who are known to some of the children in the area) doing the research may benefit the information-gathering: children sometimes feel more confident to share more personal details of their play and routines, and their thoughts and feelings on this play, with adults who they already know and trust. This can also be a person who is new to the children; however, children tend to be aware that the adults who know the children's routines, friends, places of play, schools, family and social networks will be able to put the information that the child gives into context more easily. Children may feel that playworkers will fully understand the importance of the small details of play.

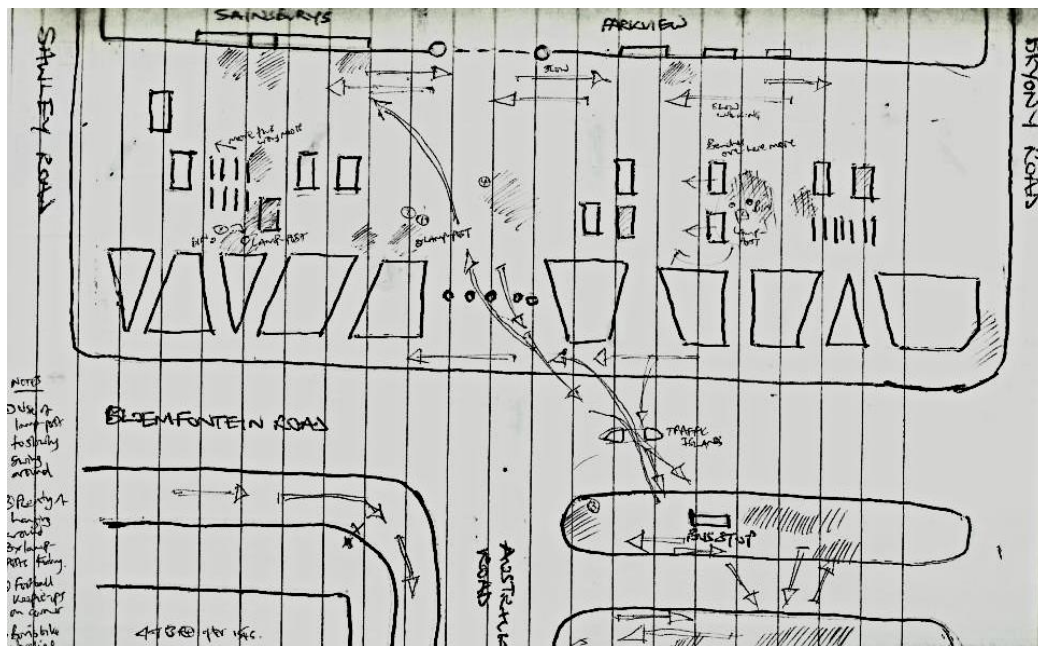
Playworkers are likely to understand children if the children talk about things in a non-literal way and/or move into the realm of talking about or with the imaginary; children are likely to understand that they are talking with an adult who can *tune into* or follow what they are saying. These comments do not discount any existing research methods or approaches, but simply express our ideas on the subtleties of the way that research is done with children, and particularly in a playwork way or setting.

Introduction to Mapping Play

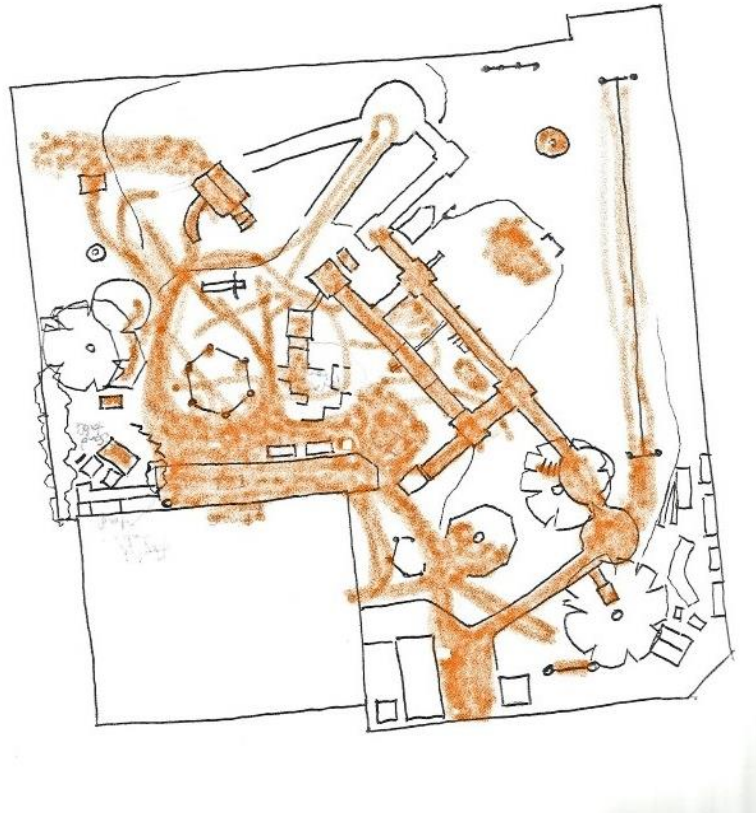
In the process of what we now term *gentle and subtle listening*, considered consultation by observation and other means into the how and where of play, action research study was undertaken, and on-going mappings were made, so as to further support children's play in White City, west London. This article relates to a qualitative data collection period between April 2015 and January 2016. Ultimately, the aims were two-fold: to increase children's opportunities to play and to remove barriers to that play (i.e. raising adult awareness and tolerance of what children do). Mapping the play (of past and present) was integral to the process of finding out about the *how* and *where*; however, it also proved beneficial in developing a further means of representing a long-held understanding of the *places* where children play (for instance the overlaid life of those places, all the play that they have seen).

Methodology

A brief overview of the methodology of the project is as follows. Play was observed on the adventure playground in the middle of the estate and off-playground at local events, at outreach sessions in the streets and parks and in the everydayness of children's lives around the estate, as appropriate.



Map 1: Example of an observation of preferred play places and routes in the public arena



Map 2: Example of amalgamated observations of preferred play places and routes on the adventure playground.

Three Year 2 and school council groups were also worked with at a local school, linking new mapping exercises with the children's existing study on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31 - children's right to play⁴. This mapping aimed to ascertain children's favoured places to play (drawings). Local working-age and elderly adults' play stories of their own childhoods were also gathered by way of either online communications, short written accounts at local events or in individual or small group audio-recorded discussions.

In the process of mapping, playworker-researcher thinking and practice was influenced by a small collection of key ideas from authors of various fields, embracing but not limited to

- the content and intent of the play belongs to the child;⁵
- the time and space needed for children to exercise their right to play (Wales Play Sufficiency Duty);
- the four registers of the Good City, being *repair*, *relatedness*, *rights* and *re-enchantment*;⁶
- five kinds of urban settings where play seems to happen most: paths, intersections, boundaries, thresholds and props;⁷
- the notion of a 'collective wisdom', that individual communities have a range of unique local knowledges, children and adults alike;⁸
- a what-if approach to researching, just as play is a what-if approach to action.⁹

Meaning-Making Considerations

We thought that the meaning that interested adults make of children's artefacts deserved some exploration. Part of the mapping research process was asking the children to create artefacts. In this case, artefacts were drawings; however, our understanding of an artefact is any leftover representation of play that is or has been. An important consideration for us when presenting the children's artefacts at the Livingmaps seminar was to be aware of individual children's subjective experiences of places, their own play experiences and of different kinds of play. The cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead took the perspective that 'It's a good thing to think about the child as long as you remember that the child doesn't exist. Only children exist. Every time we lump them together we lose something'¹⁰. This means that using the concept of *the child* is not helpful when trying to understand individual children's experiences. What individual children may get out of a place or experience may differ greatly from person to person. For example, a competitive game of jumping off high objects may be fun for children who are competitive and like heights but an unpleasant experience for children who are scared of heights and who enjoy more co-operative play or games. A stairwell in a block of flats might offer some children a private place that they enjoy away from adults; other children may feel uncomfortable with no known or *safe* adults present and may want to know that there are adults within sight, even if these adults are at a distance and not involved in the children's play. We believe that interpreting or attempting to make meaning from children's artefacts about places of play needs to be done extremely sensitively so that this process results in the clearest possible understanding of what children might have been thinking about, feeling, experiencing or trying to convey when they were creating the artefacts.

The considered observation of children at play in the urban environment - in this case with playworkers making the observations on an adventure playground, at local events, outreach sessions and in everyday local life - can also be seen to go some way towards shifting the adult mindset away from thinking about objects (such as toys, play structures and street furniture items that children play with) and the more visible physical activity that are part of playable moments, and towards a deeper understanding of what children are doing, where and possibly why there.

Places as Lived Experiences

Whereas maps are flat representations, the city-proper is a lived experience: we are a part of it, in our many navigations through its streets (like toothpaste) and other public areas and arenas, and as we navigate around its many monuments and other greater or lesser objects or props of the built environment.

Play is intrinsic to culture and, as such, children (the play experts) are essential elements of city-cultures. We might airbrush out the lived experiences when devising maps, but the lived experiences of play can be seen to linger in the city-proper. What if we were to conceive of the city as a map that we may move through, sense, and feel? What if, to the three dimensions we usually and can most easily perceive ourselves to operate within, we also mapped the added layer of time? It is not too great a leap to jump from the two-dimensional flat representation of a map to the four or five-dimensional map representation as we navigate within it and as we perceive it. The task of re-interpreting that multi-dimensional lived experience though, back into a two-dimensional map representation, is the greater challenge, to which we shall return.

Perception of Place

How is it that we might perceive? There can be a stance, a co-ordinate position (due to experience in the privileged proximity to play), a way of seeing, that perceives of *place* rather than *space*: *place* being full of all manner of past and present and possible future, emotional attachment, sensory engagement and potential returns. In short, places are weighed with

short or long stories: what has happened here, is happening, or what will happen, all fizz in the multi-dimensional map that we can walk through. Play is replete with stories, and they stick to the surfaces and sink deep into the whole. That which has been played, or is being played, is in some fashion indelibly marked within the fabric of any part of the city.

Place Names and Stories

Places often have names to accompany their stories. They are sometimes prosaic, or esoteric or direct markers of the stories themselves. In conversation with children, and with older generations who either currently live still or used to live and play in the area around White City and Shepherd's Bush, places were variously named other than their two-dimensional map representations: BBC Park or The New Park or The Chinese Jungle (being all one and the same), The Cage (a roughly triangular wedge where football was played), The Wormholt Alleys (which were haunted), The Luxury Flats (because they had sliding doors); The Frontline (the shops where the local children gather), The Rubber (a pitch).

Some of these places have since been wiped from the conventional map, but in the perception, by way of the stories, because of the lingering names, they're still there. The Rubber, a dilapidated hard court on South Africa Road, used by community members, was built over and made into pay-to-play football pitches. Beneath the Rubber though, literally and in this multi-dimensional map perception, still lie remnants of the old Franco-British White City Exhibition buildings of 1908. Beneath this are the fields before London expanded this way. In similar ways, and by way of stories of the past and observation of the present, here are the air raid shelters between the tenement blocks where music was played; where later the balconies rang out with mischievous children running along them, being chased by officers of the law; where later, much later, chalk was left overnight and in the morning the place was covered in hopscotch grids and snakes and the tags of names and various other offerings.

Here is the park where the adventure-playground-constructed trolley full of things to play with was emptied and the summer-full of children and their parents played with it all; beneath this are the ghost remains of the prefabs (whose gardens everyone was jealous of because they were the only gardens around); beneath this is the waste land, traversed over to climb the fence to the *Adventure* when it was largely unbuilt on; beneath this are the traces of the neat white Edwardian edifice of the White City which lends its name to the estate.

Here is the modern plaza on Bloemfontein Road (or Blom Road in the local colloquial) where the local children gather around the lamp-posts and the benches, riding their bikes through on regular routes; beneath which and nearby is the trace of the old Blom Road swimming baths, where you could distract the life guard and jump over the wall to get in for free; this is just a short hop in time from when the dead were laid out during the war bombings (the bodies taken away before the afternoon pool session started), all a long time before they built a supermarket on the site.

Destinations, In-Betweens, and the Everydayness of Play

Play is an everydayness of being. It can happen anywhere and everywhere that children have the will and opportunity to play. Whether play was a focus of the architects of the White City Estate or not, in the 1930s when it was officially opened, is unknown but some modern expectations of corralled play in the green strips between tenement blocks are not met: from the child's perspective, why *would* they wish to play in such narrowly overlooked and confined quarters? These are not the local destination places of choice (past generations had, for example, the old White City Stadium, which is now the site of BBC Media Village, and another supermarket, and — at the time of writing — the imminence of another development). Instead, now, the children have the two main green parks, the various other designated areas for play (the adventure playground, the *pitches* beyond, the smaller fixed

play equipment areas between tenement blocks) and so on. Rather than just happening in the destination places though, play is an everydayness: it happens on the streets themselves, in the myriad nooks and crannies of lobbies, kerbsides, pathways, in and around trees and bushes, etc. — play, we can see, also happens in these in-between places.

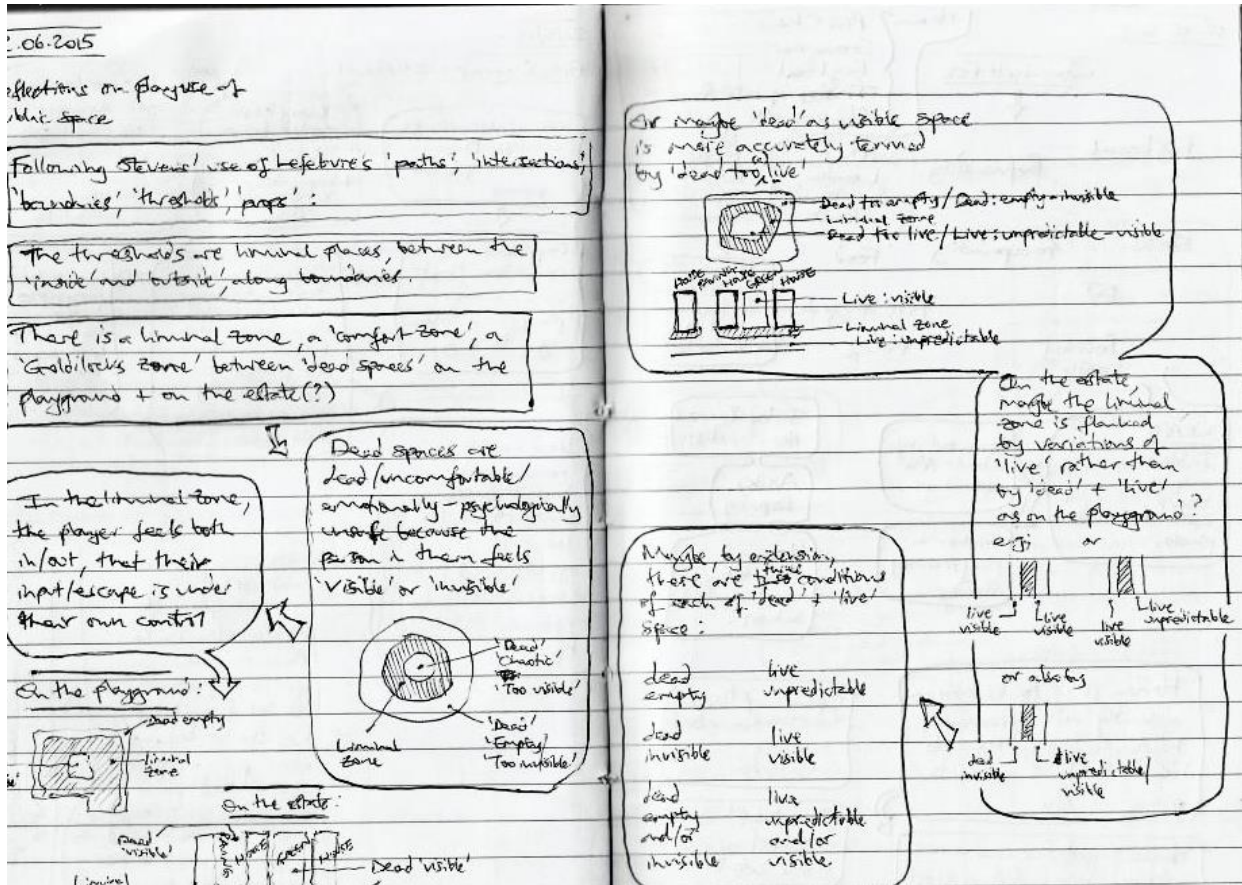
In the In-Betweens: Archaeological Layers of Place — Intergenerational, Inter-Temporal, Ghosts of Play

Where children once offered car owners the *peace of mind*, protection as it were, for their parked cars, for a fee on New Zealand Way, whilst QPR played at the nearby stadium, now children pull others crammed three to the back of a makeshift trolley; old furniture was thrown from the balconies for the community bonfire and now those paved or tarmac surfaces below are ad-hoc football pitches; beneath the balconies where children would play *Knocking Dollies Out of Bed* (you knock on a door and run away) or tying string to multiple door knockers so they all go off at once, others now balance on the walls, run out of the adventure playground throwing water balloons or chalk on the ground.

Edges, Live and Dead Zones, Urban Props and Routes

On the adventure playground and nearby, in an unfenced green area nominally for the purpose of being an outside *adult exercise gym*, the site edges are noted in terms of play: on the adventure playground, the children by and large stayed clear of the very periphery (in analysis of the observations, perhaps because this was perceived by them to be too *dead* a zone); in the adult gym area, the bushes right up against the nearby housing office wall proved conducive for hiding in and for looking out from, for stockpiling away the play equipment, hung on the branches as if looted treasure. In the in-betweens of the estate, in the destination places of the parks, and on the adventure playground alike, there are unplayed in zones that are *too dead* or *too live* (the very centres of the parks, for example, where the potential player is, perhaps, too visible) and in each there is the played in zone, the *Goldilocks Zone*, as it were: an *in between* in itself.

Children's play will happen in conducive circumstances (physical environments and human environments, where *time and space* for play are acknowledged). Their routes to destination places are often dictated in the modern world by enforced subservience to the needs of car drivers, but children's mappable and favoured routes are also play opportunities in themselves. In the observation, children will go out of their way to splash in the puddles or to examine a door of sensory importance. They will trail their fingers along the railings or the flowers; they will take detours up and over walls or into and out of courtyards, just because they are there. The urban furniture, other fixed objects or *props* are significant. (On the South Bank, there are a series of installations: orange benches, nominally, some of which are shaped in such ways or have pieces missing so as to render them functionally deficient — the children play on and over them, nonetheless). In White City, this is where the tree that was the goal post was; now, here is the wall which is balanced along, around the modern SuDS (sustainable drainage system) in Bridget Joyce Square; there were the Canning House sheds, around which biking was played; here is the tree that the children like to shake the spring blossom from, near what the older generation call the Threepenny Bit Flats.



Map 3: Notebook reflections on preferred play places on the adventure playground and in the public arena

A Pause in the Story of Stories

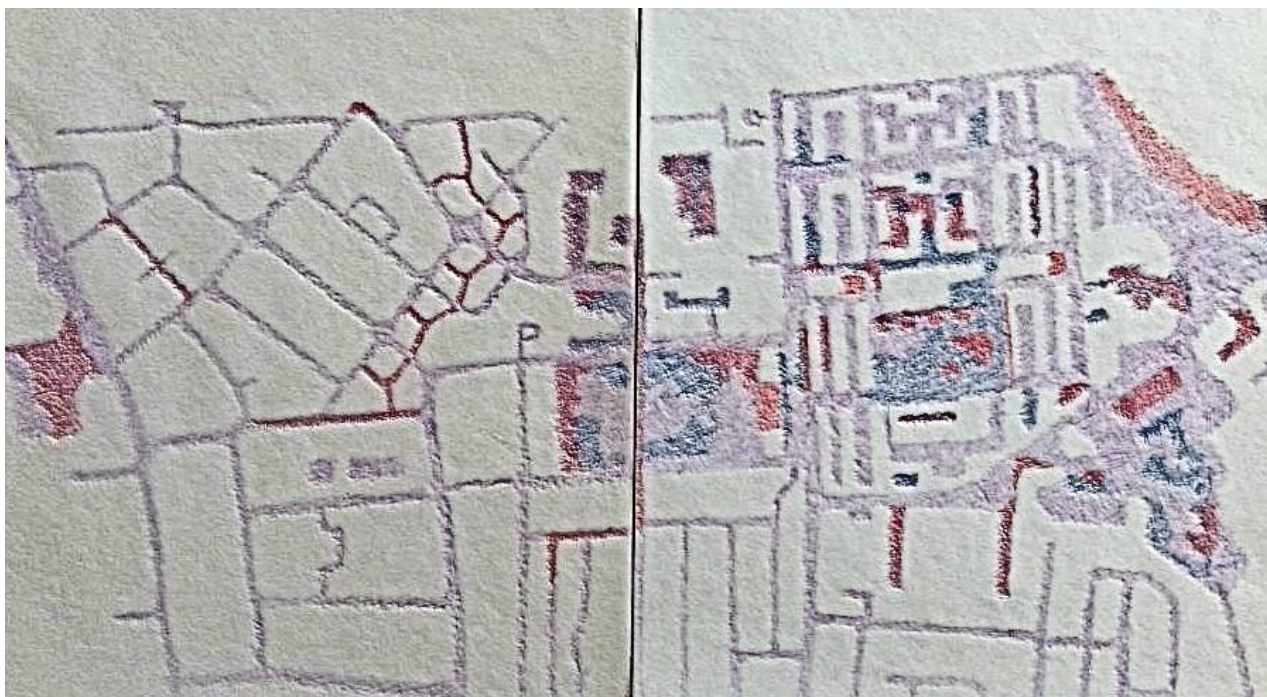
Play has happened, does happen, and will happen, anywhere and everywhere in the cityscape, which is perceived as a multitude of places within the overall place that is London. These places are lived experiences in all their felt and sensory fullnesses. The stories of play continue to fizz with their moments, their names, their props and routes, be they at the edges or at the zone of in-between. The in-betweens of the city and the destination places are all playable, and all that has happened continues to happen. However, how can we map all this?

What-If? Mapping

What transpired was a *what-if?* in itself: playing with maps led this playworker-researcher along a route from observation and discussion during data collection, to conceiving of places and the overall place of the city as a lived-in map, to sketch-mapping play places and starting to amalgamate these in order to find some way of representing all of the above. In the map sketches presented below, it must be noted that data are and cannot be comprehensive. Too much has happened, and continues to happen, here. We must, instead, have faith with the idea of places as multi-layered. The sketches represent historical preferred play places (where these can be extrapolated from the stories) initially in red; contemporary preferred play places are in blue. The streets are initially rendered in purple because, conceptually, historical and contemporary play might very well have happened anywhere here (a merging of red and blue). Only playable (more or less) public areas are shown; buildings and private gardens have been inverted to white.



Map 4: Sketch map of a range of historical (as collected and collated) and contemporary (as observed) preferred play places



Map 5: Further developed sketch map (as played with, in consideration of the 'what-if?') of historical and contemporary preferred play places

True to the observation that *play begets more play*, more playing with the maps resulted in the *what-if?* of inverting the colour scheme. The historical red now becomes an electric blue, and the contemporary blue becomes gold; the purple of the possible-play (of then or now) becomes a moss green.



Map 6: Still further developed sketch map (inverting colour scheme) of historical and contemporary preferred play places

Here, in the process, a small epiphany made itself apparent. Whilst we know that play is fluid, dynamic, always fizzing, we can also conceptualise a *digging down* into the moss, into the possible places of the city, down through layers of gold and electric blue, down and down in time. It is an archaeological layering, a beautiful object that can be held in the hand. It can be wondered at, just as a historian might wonder at a time-laden artefact, still feeling the energy of those who once made it.



Map 7: Conceptualisation of historical and contemporary preferred play places as archaeological layers

Conclusions

In this study, local children and older generations alike relayed their favoured places of play in the locale of White City by means of considered playworker observation, drawings, written and verbal stories. The process of engaging with these means of communication contributed towards raising the tolerance for play, locally, and thereby, in part, increasing those children's opportunities to play in the way that they wanted and needed to. Play observed and discussed resulted in further discussions with local adults, which resulted in greater tolerance towards play, which resulted in more opportunities to play, and so on. The process of collecting, collating and eventually mapping the data received can also be seen to have contributed towards raising adults' awareness of contemporary children's play: this article is an extension of the awareness building.

Play for play's sake is not the prevailing adult perspective on children's primary interactions with the world, but it is the way that children engage with one another, with the natural and built environment, with their streets and cities. Just because they play in this way, without concern for adult agendas such as learning or development, it does not mean that their play is frivolous and unnecessary. Play leaves its marks on the in-betweens of those city streets, on the destination places such as parks, on the routes, on the edges and in the variously playable zones of subjective experience. As such, seemingly unimportant or insignificant portions of the city, as perceived by the adult, take on the greater weight of *place*, as recalled by the child (although children may talk about such places in terms of given names or what once happened here). Places, imbued with time and play, remain, infused in the air and embedded in the archaeology of the streets: the places of play are significant to the players long after those players have grown into adulthood and old age. The play that is, and that has been, is all around us: we just have to look more deeply sometimes to see.

What, we ask, might be if more consideration is given towards children in the planning, designing, altering or rearranging of built environments.

Endnotes

¹ A catalogue of online maps and images included in this article can be found at <https://playworkings.wordpress.com/depository-of-notes/play-cartographies/the-overlaid-life-of-places-of-play-images-to-support-article/>

² Sutton-Smith, B. (2003). Play as a parody of emotional vulnerability, in Rooparine, J. L. (ed) *Play and educational theory and practice* cited in Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008). *Play for a change. Play, policy and practice: a review of contemporary perspectives* London: Play England, p 52.

³ Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p 226.

⁴ Unicef (2014). *Convention on the rights of the child* [Online]. Available from: www.unicef.org/crc/ (Accessed June 21, 2018)

⁵ PPSG (2005). *The playwork principles*. Cardiff: Playwork Steering Group.

⁶ Amin, A. (2006). *The good city*. Sage Publications on Behalf of Urban Studies Journal Limited [Online]. Available from: <http://usj.sagepub.com/content/43/5-6/1009> (Accessed July 6, 2015).

⁷ Stevens, Q. (2007). *The ludic city: exploring the potential of public spaces*. Abingdon: Routledge.

⁸ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2013). *Leopard skin wellies, a top hat and a vacuum cleaner hose*. Cardiff: Play Wales. Cited in Lester, S. (2014), North West Play Network/University of Gloucestershire draft discussion article (unpublished).

⁹ Lester, S. (2014). North West Play Network/University of Gloucestershire draft discussion article (unpublished)

¹⁰ Mead, M. (1975). Remarks at the symposium on 'Children, Nature and the Urban Environment'. Washington, March 1975.