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Quality of the City for Children: Chaos and Order

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Comment on this Research Note

Keywords: **childhood**, **Germany**, **playgrounds**, **city development**, **children's participation**.

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Adults very often have the opinion that children disturb the public order, but I think it is rather the opposite: the public order often disturbs children. I first arrived at this idea when I was a child of perhaps eight years, and now, in the adult period of my existence, I have had several opportunities to find good evidence for this theory of my early childhood. These came through some research which I conducted with my institute focused on the situation of children, mostly between the ages of five and ten. This research was requested by the government agencies of a city and a province of the Federal Republic of Germany. Our clients, the city council and administration of Freiburg, were interested in investigations which would be useful for developing proposals for the improvement of the situation of children.[1]

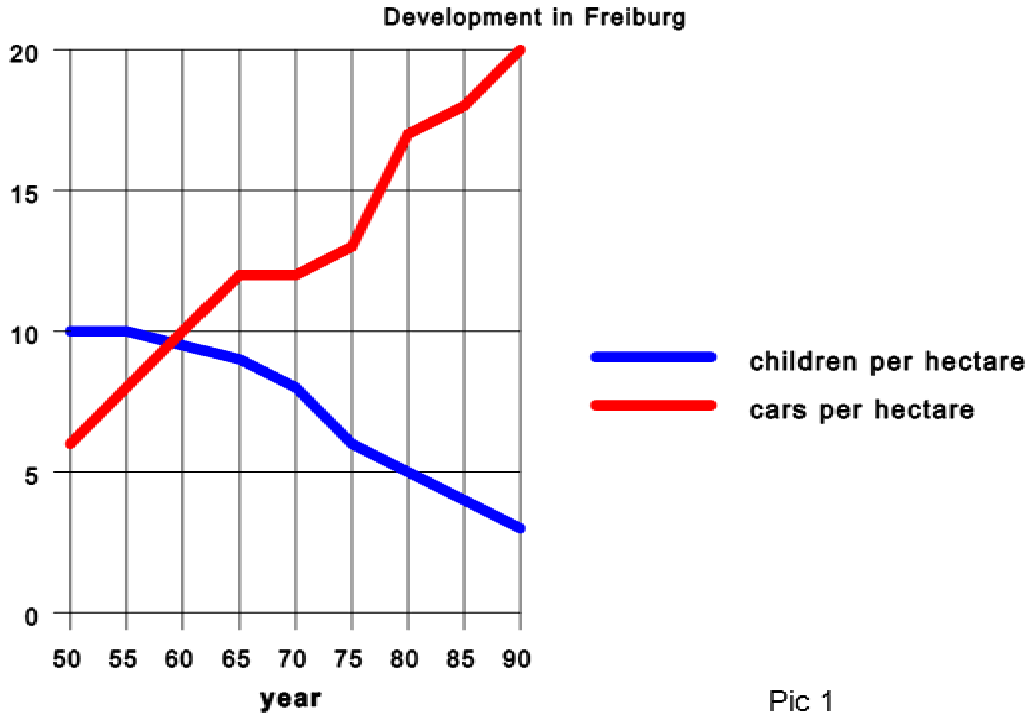
Nearly all of the many studies of childhood focus on the *social* experiences of children. Very little has been done to show how *spatial* conditions of childhood have changed and have thus produced what is arguably an entirely new type of childhood. This concentration on the "social paradigm" has severe consequences on policies for children. Development of these policies is strictly dominated by social experts: psychologists, teachers, educational experts, therapists, social workers and sociologists. Experts which have to do with the development of space, however, are generally not in any official way responsible for child policy. This is a serious problem because the situation of children in cities is heavily influenced by changes concerning their spatial environment. In the process of city development in modern societies, children have lost more and more "spaces for action." An "action space" is a territory outside the home which must have four attributes:[2]

- accessibility
- safety
- flexibility
- opportunity for interaction with other children

The reasons for the loss of suitable "action-places" are well known: traffic has expanded; the urban space has been differentiated and specialized into space for commerce, housing, production, recreation and pleasure; and the people who are relevant for city planning and who are responsible for this type of order mainly are investors and hedonistic adults, not children (Figure 1).

The result of this development is that children more and more are living in an environment that is dangerous or boring, and often both. They cannot play outside the home without supervision. They are restricted or excluded from the public sphere. They are continually observed and controlled in caretaking organizations and they look for adventures in the fictions and simulations of TV and computer games. The result is a sort of "dramatized childhood"—carefully elaborated and constructed by parents, educationalists, therapists and the market. In the words of Jean Baudrillard, children experience more and more an "agony of the real," and a "loss of reality" (Baudrillard 1978).

Figure 1. From the "City of Children" to the "City of Motor Cars"



Pic 1

Our investigations primarily focused on the importance of space for the quality of life of children and for their development. We especially studied the way in which the everyday life of children is influenced by the environment immediately surrounding their apartments. For this purpose, we selected the homes of about 4000 children between the ages of 5 and 10 in Freiburg and classified the area surrounding each home within a radius of about 200 meters according to the attributes of a good "action space."[3]

We classified an environment as having the attribute "bad quality of action space" if properties like the following could be observed:

- a speed limit of 50 km per hour, meaning normal city speed
- a street wider than 6 meters
- more than four parked cars within 20 meters of the door of the house
- no buffer separating the door from the street
- no public place usable by children and other pedestrians within a circle of 100 meters around the home
- an apartment on the third floor or higher
- noise level higher than 50 db
- no playmates that can be reached without the help of parents
- no usable place for soccer, skating or other games within a circle of 200 meters

In addition, we collected information about the time-budgeting of children through

diaries which were maintained by their parents for the purpose of this research.[4] Through the classification process and time budget diaries, we got a very precise impression of the effect of the home-environment. The results clearly showed that nearly all important aspects of the everyday life of children are greatly influenced by properties of the immediate environment,[5] including:

- the amount of time children spent outside the home with and without supervision;
- the time children watch television; and
- the need for organized child care in the afternoon.

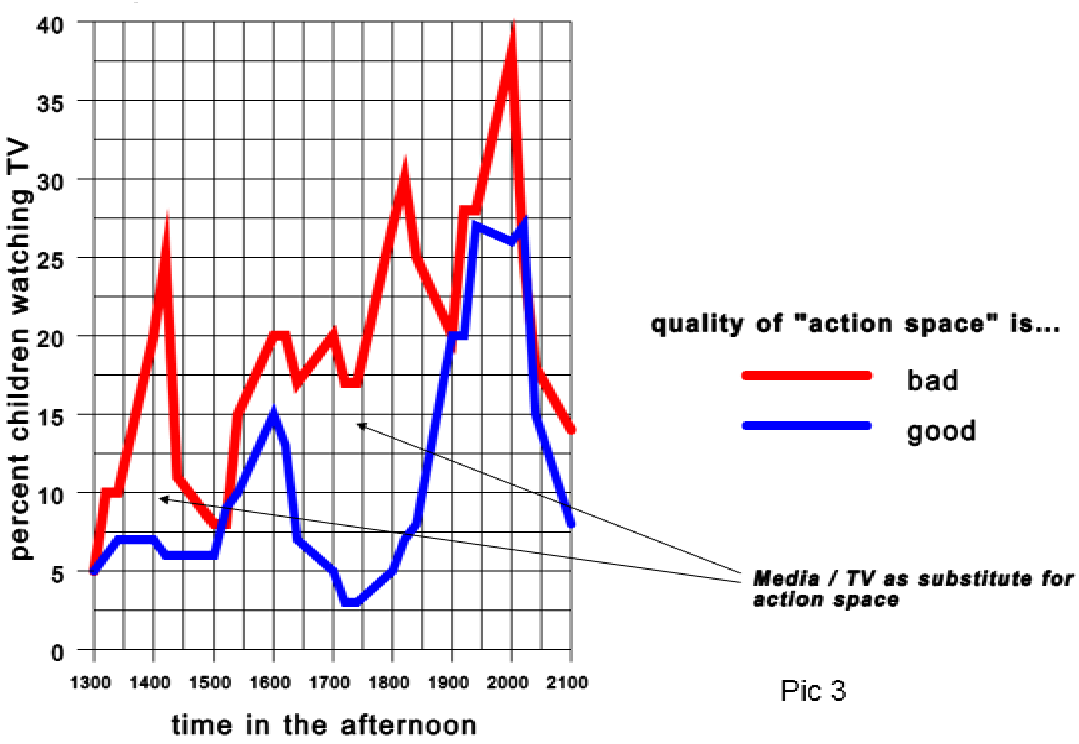
If the environment is suited for children, they spend four times longer outside without parental supervision than children who live in an environment which is not suited for them (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Quality of Action Space and Time Children Spend Outdoors

Pic 2

Similarly, if the quality of action space is poor, the percentage of children watching television in the afternoon is up to five times greater than under good conditions (Figure 3).

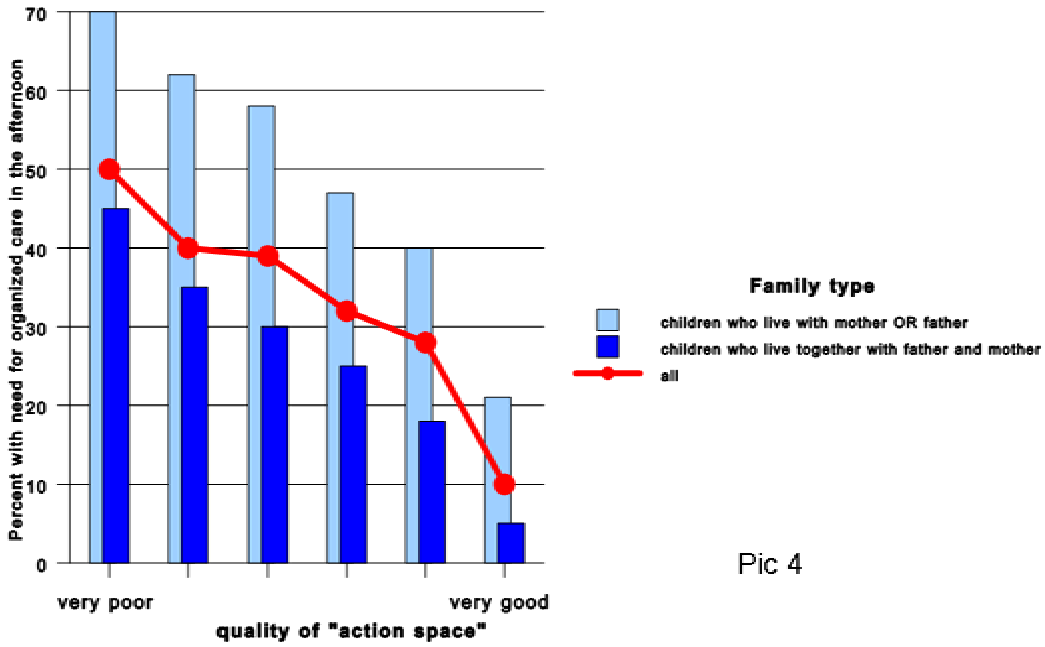
Figure 3. TV Viewing by Children in the Afternoon and Quality of Action Space



Under bad environmental conditions, meaning when there is no suitable action space, the proportion of children who participate in organized care in the afternoon is five times higher than under good environmental conditions (Figure 4).

Our research has shown that many aspects of modern childhood that are deplored by parents, teachers and politicians and which habitually are attributed to the decline of the family or to the destruction of conventional values can better be explained by properties of the public space in the city. This was a very challenging result for our clients because it demonstrated that the situation of children can be improved by political action—especially by an adequate policy of city development.

Figure 4. Quality of Action Space and Need for Organized Child Care in the Afternoon by Family Type



Pic 4

Recommendations

Per the request of our clients, we made several suggestions for how to improve the situation of children in the city. I will mention only two of our proposals here, one concerning traffic regulations and the other the design of playgrounds.

It is necessary to install a system of traffic regulation which favors pedestrians. The hierarchy should favor the accessibility of public areas by pedestrians and not merely quick and comfortable mobility for motorcars. The means to achieve this include: a reduction of speed to 30 km per hour in all residential areas, the creation of spaces that are entirely free of motor traffic, the reduction of parking zones and the promotion of public means of transport. All of this is possible and has been partly implemented; however, there is a massive clash of interests over the issue, and unfortunately in modern cities, the voices for and of children in this conflict are very weak. This is exacerbated by the fact that in many modern cities, the proportion of households with children is very low (e.g., in Germany it is less than 20 percent).

It is not sufficient, however, to create places that are free of danger by means of a reduction or re-routing of the motor traffic. It is also necessary to create places that are *attractive* to children. I will explain this idea with respect to two topics: the importance of nature and the balance between order and chaos.

Nature

A place that is attractive to children must not necessarily be "full of nature." This would, of course, be impossible in cities, because cities are by definition artificial: they are and contain artifacts which are produced by humans. Children have many interests which require places with little nature, e.g. places which have a plain surface which they can use for skating, biking or soccer. Also, children often have the desire simply to watch, communicate or meet others, all of which is possible without nature. All that is required is that children have access to public places, that such places are free of danger, that they do not have rules which prevent children's presence, and that the presence of children is accepted (Figure 5).

Figure 5. An Attractive Place Does Not Have to Be "Full of Nature": A Public Place in the Center of Freiburg

So soll es bleiben: Familien mit Kindern in der Innenstadt (Foto: Stadtplanungsamt)

Chaos and Order

The relationship between order and chaos has important implications for understanding what is attractive for children and the design of conventional playgrounds.

Since World War II, the degree of order in our cities has enormously increased. There are two indications of this trend: the increasing differentiation and standardization of the urban space and the increasing number of rules. Cities not

only have grown but one also can observe a process of inner urban differentiation. There are residential areas, areas of production, of consumption and of recreation and certainly areas for children. The possibilities for playing in these designated children's places are to a high degree standardized by their equipment and order: slides, swings, specific equipment for wobbling and creeping, and expensive play systems. This increased order also becomes visible if we consider the greater density of rules which govern behavior in public places: where one is allowed to put up posters; where one may not spray; when and how long it is possible to make music on the street; where dogs may and may not run; where people may and may not go; where one is allowed to put a baby carriage. Children are also confronted more and more with rules: rules concerning the security of equipment for playing; rules that define where and at what time children are allowed to play; what they are and are not allowed to walk on. Seen from the perspective of children, modern cities are a "jungle of rules." In order to understand what dilemmas might arise in such an environment Albert Einstein offered the following insight: "Mankind is continuously threatened by two things: one is chaos and the other is order." It seems to me that what threatens the quality of life of children in modern cities is an excess of order rather than an excess of chaos. Of course this is not valid for cities like Santiago de Chile, La Paz or Teheran, but it seems to me very true for cities in the western world.

We applied this notion to our proposals concerning playgrounds in modern cities such as Freiburg. For example, we suggested replacing the conventional and well-ordered type of playground with a type of place which is "functionally unspecific;" a place that does not offer ready-made ideas for playing but which forces children to invent something, to produce and to improvise. In other words, to replace order with chaos.

Places that are attractive for children should give them an opportunity to shape or create something according to their own ideas. This presupposes that play equipment is not fixed for specific purposes, but that it is possible and necessary for children to alter something themselves. Conventional playgrounds are far from realizing this principle (Figure 6).

The furnishing of traditional playgrounds is very expensive yet still does not realize a meaningful purpose. It is very common to observe no children at all on playgrounds of this type but rather owners of dogs with their darlings or consumers of beer or drugs. If there are children, what are they doing? They use the equipment for a very short time and generally only in the pre-established manner: they are crawling, swinging, wobbling—just as it is prescribed by the technical possibilities of the devices and by the rules for their orderly usage. I have the impression that the producers of equipment for playgrounds and the planners of such places have monkeys in mind rather than children. Our investigation enabled us to clearly demonstrate that such places are not attractive for children. We made our clients a nearly revolutionary proposal: abolish all these expensive but useless devices, deconstruct these places and establish an entirely new type of place—a place that does not look like a playground but rather like an empty site which is somewhat neglected and a little bit unkempt.

Figure 6. Furnishing of Conventional Playgrounds: Expensive and Boring

First, all of the devices would have to be removed. Then an excavator—under the supervision of four or five children—should shape an interesting surface—a ground with little hills and dips which can collect rain water and change to mud. The vegetation should not be too complex; in no case should the plants be valuable or worthy of protection, but rather willow bushes, blackberries, or bushes of elder or raspberries. If possible, such a place should have a supply point for water. It is also necessary to equip such places with materials which would be useful for construction, such as stones, bricks, boards and beams of different sizes. A special attraction would be the wreck of a motorcar in such a place.

Figure 7. Children and Their Parents in the Period of "Deconstruction" and "Reconstruction"

Figure 8. A New Type of Playground in Freiburg

This proposal has been accepted by the politicians of Freiburg as well as several other cities.[6] Some radical ideas—for example the wrecked car idea—have been removed, but the basic idea has been accepted and with great success. This is so because these places have two important advantages. First, they are much cheaper than conventional playgrounds,[7] and our cities have to be careful with their money. The financial crisis of our cities surely was a good condition for the realization of our proposals. Second, and more importantly, the transformation of the well-ordered conventional playgrounds into somewhat chaotic and, for adults, sometimes irritating places was highly accepted by the children—although not always by the parents, because their children often returned home very dirty.[8] Whereas on a

conventional playground one seldom could observe more than two or three children watched by their anxious mothers, after the deconstruction and reconstruction of the new playgrounds, one can now observe 50 or more children in the same place—children who are loud and busy and, according to their own statements, they don't play but rather "work." Meanwhile, these places are so attractive and successful that an initiative of worried neighbors has been formed, citizens who feel themselves disturbed in their afternoon naps and who want a revival of the old and well-ordered playgrounds because they were so nice and clean, so agreeable and quiet (Figures 7 and 8).

The idea of reconstructing conventional playgrounds and making them open to a certain amount of chaos comes very close to Richard Sennett's concept of a "narrative place" (Sennett 1990). These new playgrounds are narrative because they are open and flexible in a functional way. They invite children to create experiences of their own, experiences not controlled by adults or predefined by "helpful" supervising persons.[9] In these places children learn to be creative and to construct things. They enable experiences about which children can tell stories and which are sedimented in their long-term memory as images of a childhood that included the necessity and the possibility of self-organization. I think people of my post-war generation can immediately understand what I mean: we have memories of childhood without McDonalds, without playgrounds, and without the simulations of TV and computer games, but childhood with access to such "narrative places."

What will happen if we do not make efforts to improve the environmental situation of children? Some consequences are already very obvious. For example,the proportion of overweight children has increased rapidly. Rising as well is the figure of children who are retarded in their physical competence; teachers, for instance report about children of the age of 6 who are not able to walk backwards. In conversations with teachers I have also learned that more and more children are losing the ability to narrate, to tell a story. But this is not surprising: about what shall children tell if they have spent the whole day in front of the TV or on a conventional playground? This handicap indicates a far more serious consequence: if children do not have the possibility of creating experiences of their own, if they live in an unfavorable urban environment, one must fear that their development into creative human beings will be greatly hindered. Children who grow up in an environment with poor quality action space have problems exercising curiosity and they acquire the mentality of consumers and not of producers. There is a considerable probability that they will develop the same deficiencies as the products of artificial intelligence: an enormous formal competence but no semantic competence; that is, they can communicate well but they have nothing to say.

Endnotes

1. Freiburg is a city with 200,000 inhabitants and about 8,000 children between the ages of 5 and 10. The city is situated on the slope of the Black Forest and was never an industrial town. The conditions for children in Freiburg are clearly better than average in Germany. The city is famous for its strict ecologically-oriented policies and therefore the conditions for the realization of our ideas were extremely good.
2. Compare B.Blinkert (1993). *Aktionsräume von Kindern in der Stadt*. Pfaffenweiler, 46f.
3. We tried to get information about the situation of *all* the children between the ages of five and ten who lived in Freiburg, but actually got data for about 50 percent of them.
4. The "time-budget-children" were a random sample of 430 children drawn from the total of 4,004.
5. By multivariate data analysis we could show: 1) there was no significant correlation between quality of action space and relevant properties of the social situation (e.g., family status or education of parents); and 2) from all predictors which were included in multiple regressions to explain several aspects of children's time use, the variable "quality of action space" had the highest average beta-coefficient:

Predictors	Average beta-coefficients	Outcomes (dependent variables)
Quality of action space	0.28	Time outside without supervision; time outside with supervision; time in organized afternoon care; time for organized activities in the afternoon; time for tv-watching
Age of child	0.17	
Education of parents	0.16	
Professional status	0.07	
Sex of child	0.06	
Incomplete family	0.05	

6. In 2004 there are 151 playgrounds in Freiburg. 45 correspond more or less to our proposals; of those, 21 are reconstructed and 24 are new. The Freiburger Gartenamt (Office of Gardens and Greens), the office which is responsible for playgrounds, formulated the following ten Theses and Principles (translated from Bernhard Utz, director of the "Gartenamt", Freiburg, October 1997):

1. The "playgrounds of the future" in Freiburg are developed in close cooperation with scientific experts.
2. Planners are challenged to redefine their traditional norms and values.
3. For the construction and operating of the first new playgrounds, courage and staying power are necessary.
4. Optimal playing areas are possible if all interested persons and groups combine their efforts.
5. The active participation of children, youth and adults is very important in the periods of planning, construction and operating.
6. Engagement, creativity and flexibility in proposals are necessary prerequisites of the person who is responsible for the reconstruction.
7. There is no difference in the security between the new type of playground and conventional playgrounds.
8. The costs of construction amount to 50 percent of the costs for a conventional playground.
9. The operating costs are about the same.
10. The council and the administration of Freiburg will continue with this successful model of playground.

7. The Freiburger Gartenamt reports that on average, the costs for a playground of the new type amount only to 50 percent of the costs for a conventional playground. However, the operating costs are about the same.
8. As we expected and as confirmed by the city administration, this is the only "harm" which has been observed on these new playgrounds.
9. An important difference between this new type of playground and an "adventure playground" is the absence of supervising persons like "playworkers."

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