BROKEN BONES

Towards a strategy for the unofficial playground

It is obvious, sad to say, that repetition has everywhere defeated uniqueness, that the artificial and contrived have driven all spontaneity and naturalness from the field, and, in short, that products have vanquished works.
Henri Lefebvre

Better a broken bone than a broken spirit.
Lady Allen of Hurtwood

That the psychological well-being of the city and its inhabitants requires a network of green spaces, open to all, is incontrovertible. The recent rash of government studies and initiatives into the subject, notably 'Green Spaces, Better Places: The final report of the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce' (2002)[1], illustrates an official recognition of this need. In the face of the phenomenal levels of urbanisation witnessed in western cities in the latter half of the nineteenth century, visionary planners such as Fredric Law Olmsted and Ebenezer Howard not only identified and made the case for such provision as a kind of visceral safety-valve, but offered both clear manifestoes describing the practicalities of its realisation, and concrete, so to speak, examples. That Olmsted's Manhattan masterpiece, Central Park, still exists with both scale and location intact under immense economic and spatial pressure today is nothing short of a miracle. What is more, it is regarded by the city's inhabitants as not only the lungs, but the beating heart of the city, a wellspring of vitality for whom every New Yorker (or at least Manhattanite) feels a kind of personal connection and public responsibility. However, it is exactly the kind of voracious development that created the need for such spaces that has been the main source of strain on them. The constant and acute need for land during periods of economic and population growth for both residential and commercial development, combined with a lack of consistent clarity over who should be responsible for their construction and upkeep, not to mention their content, has meant that although there is no doubt about their value as part of the urban fabric, the politics of public space remain turbulent terrain.

The Victorian and pre-war eras in Britain left a legacy of parks, swimming pools, promenades, bowling greens, formal gardens, and other leisure facilities that were evidence of a sense of civic responsibility and pride, despite their origination in times of economic hardship compared to the relative affluence of today. Local authorities felt a duty not only to simply set aside space for recreational purposes, but also to ensure that the facilities provided were of a standard and range that catered for all desirable members of society. What is more, such provisions were designed as local landmarks; they were a way of putting areas 'on the map', advertisements for both the ambitions of its population and the enterprise of its administration. In terms of Henri Lefebvre's distinction, these kinds of spaces might be seen as 'works', manifestations of municipal optimism and forethought. However, although many of these spaces sadly endure as debased vestiges of their former glories, it would be naïve to ascribe their current condition to mere neglect or carelessness. Just as the twentieth century is characterised by a shifting political, cultural, and ideological heterogeneity, the battle over who knows what's best for the public realm has left the diverse and inconsistent heritage of parks and playgrounds that we have today.

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, with the withering of the Victorian tradition of grand-scale works of public largesse and the concurrent explosion of consumer culture, the priorities of both local government and the status of the individual as citizen have inexorably altered, arguably for the worse. The increasing commercialisation of the UK public sector over the past fifty years has drastically recast the role of local authorities as service providers, its populace as customers, and as such, having requirements that can be identified and filled in the most efficient and systematic way possible. The erosion of the ideal of citizenship and mutual responsibility in the face of the accretion of private wealth brings to mind economist J. K. Galbraith's adage of 'private wealth, public squalor', or as urban planners Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard contend, 'Cities are becoming meaningless places beyond their citizens' grasp. We no longer know the origins of the world around us. We rarely know where the materials and products come from, who owns what, who is behind what, what was intended. We live in cities where things happen without warning and without our participation. It is an alien world for most people. It is little surprise that most withdraw from community involvement to enjoy their own private and limited worlds.'[2]

The election of the Labour government in this country in 1997 continued apace the previous administration's policy of wholesale privatisation of public services. However, arguments that a free market would provide quality and efficiency through competition were augmented by a newer, more caring rhetoric. The ongoing debate around who should be responsible for the provision of key services has emphasised the concepts of 'choice', 'best value', and 'customer care', yet has not addressed concerns about accountability when service providers fail to deliver or meet targets. Numerous cases involving the education, health, and transport industries have highlighted a culture of buck-passing and evasiveness in the face of failure that has done little for public faith in this new, streamlined version of the public/private sector, despite continued attempts to initiate various public consultation mechanisms. No wonder disgruntled 'customers' have become obsessed with the apportioning of guilt and blame, rather than concentrating on how to get the best out of a system that, in most cases, is here to stay. It is also unsurprising that innovation in terms of public service delivery and content has been scarce in this era, as private companies seek to minimise overheads while avoiding liability for incautious initiatives. This is equally the case for the network of parks and playgrounds that exist today; as social policy writer Ken Worpole comments, 'It is increasingly said that Britain's public realm lacks imaginative design and flair, as well as being child-friendly.'[3]

This paucity of invention, however, has a history dating to the 1950s and 60s, when it was identified by forward thinkers such as Lady Allen of Hurtwood, champion of the cause of free play and inspiration for the rise of the adventure playground in post-war Britain.[4] Inspired by the exciting and challenging, not to mention thrillingly transgressive, opportunities for play that the numerous bombsites in inner city Britain gave children, the ethos of the adventure playground was to allow children first and foremost a sense of sovereignty over their play space.

What soon became clear was that when given the means to build their own equipment and the opportunity to take risks and learn from them, children's ingenuity and sense of responsibility far outstripped the imaginations of those who had hitherto been answerable for their play provision.[5] The adventure playground as fluid and adaptable, tantalising children with exciting possibilities for physical and emotional exploration embodies the idea of play as preparation for citizenship, an archetype of the 'you get out what you put in' attitude towards public life. From Lefebvre's point of view, the adventure playground embodies the spirit of public space as work – collaborative, adaptable, and organic, it is the antithesis of the product's repetitious uniformity. However, not all playgrounds can be adventure playgrounds. They require a certain level of energy, attention, and supervision that simply cannot be provided on every street corner. Pragmatically speaking, the fixed-equipment playground is here to stay, in which case two routes are open to designers and those in local government responsible for their provision, each of which could involve the participation of children.

One is to simply redesign equipment, replacing older, outdated equipment with more of the same, but newer and more exciting. This is no doubt the choice that manufacturers of the kinds of homogenous, modular equipment we see in the majority of parks and playgrounds would like us to make. After all, their business is product-led and industrial in scale; product 'innovation' is what drives the market. The traditional role of the designer is in this respect clear, his or her methodologies tried and tested. However, according to Jacobs and Appleyard, '...design has too often assumed that new is better than old. But the new is justified only if it is better than what exists. Conservation encourages identity and control and, usually, a better sense of community, since old environments are more usually part of a common heritage.'[6] What this implies is that new products are not necessarily the answer. Indeed, if a product-centred climate is one of the main causes of our current problems with playgrounds and public space, it does not make sense to simply create more products. From a cognitive point of view, one's understanding of and familiarity with a place are dependent on a level of environmental stability, as well as imageability.[7] We are far too ready to knock down buildings or replace outdated or 'broken' products without having considered more innovative ways of bringing them back into use through adaptation and recontextualisation, an attitude exalted in the culture of consumer electronics. Despite advertising rhetoric that expounds the virtue of connectivity, the real effect of such products has been to focus our attention on the devices that mediate this connection, privileging individualistic notions of ownership, personal property, and status. In a world where scarcity of resources is a fact rather than a threat, the example we should be showing children is one of resourcefulness, ingenuity, and renewal rather than making expendability a fact of life. However, although sustainability issues are undoubted, it is also the case that in developed countries consumer electronics marketing has habituated children to concepts of choice, personalisation, and interactivity that have made rendered the endless variations on similar themes of typical equipment obsolete.[8]

This approach not only ignores the significantly more sophisticated expectations of today's children from their leisure pursuits, but compounds children's sense of alienation from their surroundings, compromising the sense of sovereignty they should feel over a space that is, after all, ostensibly designed for them: 'Too many local authorities still tend to favour the seemingly cheaper solution of buying in standardised designs, furnishings and equipment, which appear to come with all the right "safety" guarantees, but which not only make every park and playground look the same, but which, because there has been no consultation or involvement locally in the procurement process, are regarded as something "they" parachuted in. They automatically therefore become something which "they" can look after.'[9] Sociologist Sharon Zukin's assertion that, 'The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what – and who – should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power'[10] illustrates the fact that if we want children to feel some sort of responsibility for their playgrounds, these environments must symbolically and practically manifest the will and desires of their users. The inflexible nature of such equipment manifests a surreptitious form of social regulation, both physically and symbolically limiting deviant interpretations whilst maintaining existing power structures.

The second approach concerns different ways of engaging with users of public space and playgrounds through a committed process of continuous consultation in order to regain their lost sense of personal and collective responsibility for their environment and its facilities. Various youth forums, Young Persons Councils, citizens' juries, and various other official channels of consultation already exist all over the country. The problem with these channels, however, is their formal nature. On one hand, the very people who are attracted to participate in them are not necessarily those that best represent the users of these kinds of spaces; not everyone enjoys sitting on committees, and it is hardly revelatory that not all children enjoy doing the same things, just as not all children understand and are sensitive to the needs of other children. On the other hand, there exists a structural methodology to these processes that largely predetermines the types of outcomes that are acceptable. Discussion is oriented towards what the council can do for children – a kind of fine-tuning for the service provider – but within established guidelines of paternalistic council practice. Although they may in many cases be merely common sense safety guidelines, the conventional nature of local authority decision-making means that ideas are filtered by a bureaucratic, territorial sensibility of acceptability and control. What is feared most is the idea that any resulting initiative may be out of their hands.

Charles Leadbeater's recent document for social policy think-tank Demos, entitled 'Personalisation through Participation' proposes a new form of public service delivery, in which the role of the state is recast as enabler, providing '... a platform or an environment in which people take decisions about their lives in a different way.'[11] This suggests a recasting of users as '...co-designers and co-producers of a service...actively [participating] in its design and provision.'[12] This approach aims to promote personal and mutual responsibility for welfare and the environment through self-initiated strategies, in

which '...the professionals are designing environments, networks and platforms through which people can together devise their own solutions.'[13] It is in this context that I am proposing a change in the way playgrounds are used through a reinterpretation of the idea of continuous and 'intimate' consultation. This requires a re-evaluation of the role of the designer in this process, shifting from a focus on the end product, from a new piece of equipment to the landscaping of a park, to a focus on the activity that takes place in the playground. So, how can a designer influence how a park is used and encourage children to genuinely claim the space as their own? Clearly some kind of direct intervention is required, with a different approach for different spaces and communities, but this can be developed over time, especially if the outcome is not tied to a rigid design objective.

Clearly, a fresh way of evaluating public space and playgrounds in order to maintain their vitality and relevance is essential. Consultation with their users on a participatory level is required in terms of analysis and design; the question, of course, is how to go about doing this. It is with this objective in mind that I have developed the project Broken Bones, through which to explore these ideas. My own research has used as inspiration architecturally subversive activities such as skateboarding and, more recently freerunning, in which participants find ways of reinterpreting the built environment by executing a series of daring yet elegant moves over, under, and through (originally) banal architectural forms and, in the process, transforming these spaces and claiming a kind of ownership. It is in this spirit that I have gone into a specific playground in south London with the intention of encouraging this sense of ownership through changing the way in which typically uninspiring playground equipment can be used. The aim was to not merely make equipment more exciting, but simply to open up new possibilities and associations around it, although there is no doubt that with all the best intentions in the world, without a clear element of fun the project would have singularly failed to engage a single child. The response to my initial forays, characterised by predetermined alterations to individual pieces of equipment, was a mixture of bafflement and amusement, but the sight of an adult with no obvious agenda other than to make the playground a more fun place to be soon stimulated an active rather than passive interest in what was happening. Indeed, in later interventions, characterised by more ambiguous, interpretive additions to equipment, children began to formulate and carry out design strategies with energy and imagination, taking great pleasure in their own boldness and ingenuity. It was no accident that, as one child commented, he'd never seen the park so busy on a Saturday. Over a more sustained period of time I have no doubt that my influence would have become less and less, as the children began to see for themselves that they really did have a say over their environment, and that they did have the space to use their imaginations however they pleased. My conclusion is that the stimulation of their spatial awareness would enhance their connection to not only the site of these experiments, but a wider range of official and unofficial spaces in their neighbourhood.

Educational and architectural academics Ellen Jacobs & Peter Jacobs observed that, 'With the advent of the 'undesigned' recreational network, a new vista will be opened which should provide the urban dweller with the opportunity to plan, create and control his environment. Both calculated risks and trial-and-error testing are essential to the play experience, and must be conceived of as integral parts of the spatial fabric of the community.'[14] This approach underlines the importance of the informal, interpretive use of not just playgrounds but public space in general. Paradoxically, despite drawing attention to its 'undesigned' nature, it also leaves ample room for a direct, unofficial contact between designer and user, a contact that the designer must privilege and develop if he or she is to continue to innovate not simply products, but the language and goals of design. Designers Marion Buchenau and Jane Fulton Suri's paper on 'Experience Prototyping', emphasises the need for this kind of empathy between designer and user, suggesting, '...experience is, by its nature, subjective and...the best way to understand the experiential qualities of an interaction is to experience it subjectively.'[15] In the case of the methodology that I am working towards, however, in which the designer is recast as arbitrator, facilitator, mobiliser, and adviser, this experience becomes both the prototype and artefact at once. I am not suggesting that the designer recasts him or herself as anti-establishment insurrectionary or rebel, for these types of contrived positions rarely serve more than the individual ego. Rather, in collaboration with the relevant authorities, a way of designing spaces for play that acknowledges and even privileges children's tendencies to deviate and digress in the name of play can lead to a richer environment for all.

[1] www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/ documents/page/odpm_urbpol_607952.pdf

[2] Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard, 'Towards an Urban design Manifesto',p.495.

[3] Ken Worpole, *No Particular Place to Go?* Part I, p.1

[4] Lady Allen of Hurtwood, *Planning for Play.*

[5] The diary of John Bertlelson, play leader of the first adventure playground, established in Emdrup, Copenhagen, is particularly revealing in this respect. In Arvid Bengtsson, Adventure Playgrounds.

[6] Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard, *Towards an Urban design Manifesto*, p.496

[7] Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City.*

[8] Jay Beckwith lists a number of terms and concepts linked to computing and information technology that inform his playground design practice in *Why Our Playgrounds are Boring to Today's Wired Child.* Speech at Minnesota Recreation and Parks Association 63 rd Annual Conference, May 2000.

[9] Ken Worpole, *No Particular Place to Go?* Part II, p.4

[10] Sharon Zukin, *Whose Culture? Whose City?* p.133

[11] Charles Leadbeater, *Personalisation through participation* p.16

[12] ibid. p.23

[13] ibid. p.24

[14] Ellen Jacobs & Peter Jacobs, Street Play: *Re-creating networks for the urban child*, p.249

[15] Marion Buchenau & Jane Fulton Suri, *Experience Prototyping.* Ideo. www.viktoria.se/fal/kurser/ winograd-2004/p424-buchenau.pdf

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Inside front and inside back covers:
Video stills from the documentation of
the Broken Bones project (2004)

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