

Symposium: Space to Play  
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## The Value of Investing in Our Children

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*The market value of the very young is small. Only in the sight of God and the law  
is the apple blossom worth as much as the apple.*

(Janusz Korzak <sup>(1)</sup>)

### Where Do Children Play?

'Where do children play?' was the theme of a recent conference held at Goldsmiths University. It was co-hosted by the Alliance for Childhood and Roger Green of the Centre for Community Engagement and Research. This is a question I have been asking policy makers and people involved in development whenever I had the opportunity. From their answers, it is clear that children were not very much in their mind. Many people do not know how to deal with this question.

Children are invisible. From Victorian times, the saying was 'children should be seen and not heard'. More recently, they are scarcely seen, never mind heard. I was asked by a play worker recently: where do you see children out and about in London, other than in organised groups? The answer is hardly at all. I have been going around looking at playground designs and have rarely seen children playing in them. Yet children love to play. When asked 'if you had the choice between staying at home with your computer or going out into the woods, what would you choose?', the majority choose the woods.

Contrast this to Copenhagen, which has taken up the challenge of becoming a child friendly city. There the comment is more likely: has there been an increase in birth rate? I've never seen so many children in a city centre<sup>(2)</sup>.

There are two play areas in Greenwich, not far from each other. The first is in a new housing development. It is for 2-5 year olds who must be accompanied by a responsible adult, according to the sign. There is fencing all around not just the playground, but also the ball-playing area and the steps to the basement next to it. It has about three pieces of play equipment and a hard surface. It is too small for more than one or two children and not really conducive to running around. I can imagine as a 5 year old being very bored after a short time. The second is a Forest School. There is a wooded area with a circle of logs for the children to sit on and growing boxes for flowers and vegetables. It is a wild place which allows plenty of room for adventure and imagination. Comparing the two, I would say that the cost the first is greater by far than the cost of the second. However, the value of the second as a space to play outweighs that of the first.

### The Nature of Development in London Today

Next to where I live, an old community centre is being converted into flats. Someone has written on the wall: Where's the affordable housing? Some wit has written under it: Margate.

Short term thinking and the drive to bring in foreign investment has narrowed the parameters for creating new living environments. The anti-corruption group Transparency International have just

published a report on a survey of 2,000 flats or houses in 14 developments around London <sup>(3)</sup>. The survey showed that 1,616 of the homes were purchased by individuals or companies from abroad. That is, nearly 80% of the known buyers come from overseas, mainly from China, Singapore, Malaysia and the Gulf. The consequence, according to Transparency International, is that: “price rises consistently outstrip wage increases, dozens of prospective buyers compete for a shrinking pool of affordable stock, while rent prices rise ever higher. ... Developments are designed to meet the tastes of the wealthy overseas investors and left underused.” Their tastes do not include space for children or young families. A YouGov poll in the report shows that half of Londoners aged 25 to 49 are considering moving out of the city. Council Housing renters are already being rehoused in Birmingham, never mind Margate, or elsewhere, outside their communities and away from their families and Council property is being sold off to developers.

The London property market is highly vulnerable to corrupt wealth flowing into it. Analysis of open source material found over £4.2 billion worth of properties were bought with suspicious wealth. Corruption causes high levels of instability abroad leading to ‘crisis capital’ being placed in safe havens like London. Since 2006 around £100 billion of hidden inflows have entered the UK. House prices are affected as illicit wealth and crisis capital entering the UK increase demand in the London housing market, particularly at the top-end; “the ripple effects they generate resonate across London” New build developments are built targeting wealthy international investors and are not meeting demand for affordable homes. In 14 landmark London developments almost 40 per cent of future homes were bought by those from high corruption risk jurisdictions.

The report makes a number of recommendations for ways the government can tackle the corruption problem and it is to be hoped they will act on these recommendations. In addition, an argument to change the nature of development to become more child-friendly needs to be made on a social and cultural, political and rights, and economic level, creating a wider understanding of investment and the value of investing in our children. The long term benefits of giving children the space to play need to be understood and taken seriously.

### **The social and cultural argument**

There is an ancient mulberry tree in a park which was once, in the 17th century, John Evelyn’s garden at Sayes Court. He grew many species of trees there and was one of the earliest environmentalists. He lobbied the King, Charles II, to grow trees in the city to decrease pollution, which was a problem then as well as now. In the early 20th century, one of his descendants, also John Evelyn, gave permission to the McMillan sisters, Margaret and Rachel, to set up a children’s centre there. Their philosophy was to let the poorest children of Deptford sleep under the stars at night and experience the dawn. The Rachel McMillan Nursery and Children’s Centre is still active today and the children spend most of their time outdoors<sup>(4)</sup>. The park is only one-third of the garden. The other two-thirds are included in what is to be a new development at Convoys Wharf, a 40 acre site with a long history. The intention is to build 3,500 units, including the kind of high rise flats which have been appearing all around London, with its consequences for the local community. A campaign was begun to try to modify the development plans to include saving Sayes Court garden from being built over. Eventually planning permission was granted with one of the conditions that the garden would be established as an educational and community project<sup>(5)</sup>. The main argument had been the need to respect the historical, archeological, cultural and environmental value. This shows that change can happen.

### **What investment in children can do**

Penny Wilson is a play worker from the Glamis Adventure Playground at Shadwell. She gave an impressive talk about the creation of a playground for children in Tower Hamlets in the ‘Where Do Children Play?’ conference. I went to meet her recently and she showed me around the area. What impressed me was that with a grant of £20,000 from Kerrygold, the whole community engaged in

designing and building the play space, which became known as the Cow Garden<sup>(6)</sup>. Through this was created a social space and a community asset. Meeting the needs of the children had brought the community together. Moreover, all along the roads there and in every available patch of green space, there was community intervention to make the district a place to enjoy and take pride in, including the Bee Garden. Even the simple act of painting an area of road pink had deterred drug dealers from using it as their haunt - that and eyes which had been put on the fence posts.

### **Changing attitudes on a political and rights level**

Every child has a right to play and to be heard and listened to, according to the UN Convention on the rights of the child<sup>(7)</sup>. The defence of these rights is an important means of placing children's need to play at the centre of policy and development considerations. Establishing children's right to play can be a force for change.

The Alliance for Childhood European Network meets in Brussels. Six times a year they organise a meeting in the European Parliament on the Quality of Childhood, inviting an expert from a European country to speak on their work, followed by a discussion<sup>(8)</sup>. The meeting is sponsored by MEP's and is sometimes attended by members of the Commission. This way, there is the possibility of raising awareness among politicians of the need of children to experience a healthy childhood and this in turn can affect policy decisions.

The Alliance for Childhood in Brazil holds a Play Week every year in May, leading up the International Children's Day<sup>(9)</sup>. Events take place in 30 centres around the whole country, involving thousands of children and adults. In many towns and cities, the local authorities have now adopted Play Week and recognise the value of play.

### **The economic argument on the value of play**

When children are allowed to play freely, they benefit in a number of ways. Benefits include: more movement and exercise, inner equilibrium, social engagement, problem solving and improved motor skills. There is an obvious economic benefit in that they are healthier, there is less chance of obesity and therefore less danger of diabetes. The incidence of depression and self-harm decreases. After play, children have improved concentration, perform better at school and are better behaved. All of these things have consequences for the amount of money spent on providing health care, counselling, special teaching classes and providing discipline or drugs to control behaviour. This is a tangible economic benefit. There is another level of economic benefit which I will come to later. First I would like to look at the millennial generation.

### **The millennial generation**

The name Millennials has been given to the generation born between around 1984 and 2004. They are either a problem or an asset, depending on whose point of view you are looking from.

For example, they are perceived by bosses as tough to manage, narcissistic, disinterested, unfocussed, lazy. They, by contrast, see themselves as being true to themselves, they want to do what they love, to work with people they relate to, to do work that has a purpose for the future of society, meaning is more important to them than money and they need creative freedom<sup>(10a)(10b)</sup>.

Kyung-Hee Kim, an educational psychologist at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, has analysed scores from tests on children from kindergarten age to 18 years, that measure their creativity in different forms. She reported that they began to decline in 1984 or shortly after, and have continued to decline ever since<sup>(10c)</sup>. The data indicate that: 'children have become less emotionally expressive, less energetic, less talkative and verbally expressive, less humorous, less

imaginative, less unconventional, less lively and passionate, less perceptive, less apt to connect seemingly irrelevant things, less synthesising and less likely to see things from a different angle'. The decline in opportunity to play has been accompanied by a decline in empathy and a rise in narcissism, which is exactly what we would expect to see in children who have little opportunity to play socially<sup>(10d)</sup>.

This period, beginning in 1984, is when the Millennials were growing up. The perception of the bosses shows many of the characteristics which are the consequence of lack of play. The Millennials are pointing us to the need for free play in childhood and work structures that allow them space to express their creative freedom to contribute their talents to the world and the economy.

"I'm a creative, independent, motivated free-thinker who just wants to be happy - I'm a millennial."

## **Creativity is Capital**

Joseph Beuys was a conceptual artist active in the mid 60's to mid 80's<sup>(11)</sup>. He co-founded the Green Party in Germany and was most likely responsible for the adoption of the Basic Universal Income as party policy. Basic Universal Income is being thought of now as a potential substitute for paid employment, given the changes taking place in society and work right now. It is being tried out in a number of countries.

His philosophy was: 'Every Human Being is an Artist', that is, 'a freedom being, called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures that shape and inform our lives.' He could easily be describing a Millennial.

Another of Beuys's basic concepts is Creativity = Capital. By capital, he means the inherent capacity in all human beings to be creative. His belief that every human being is an artist, that is a creative being, can also be interpreted as creativity is what makes us human. We can learn from the younger generations, Millennials and those that follow, that to enable them to grow into happy fulfilled and productive members of society, they need the freedom to play from an early age. Going back to the statement by Janusz Korzak, the apple blossom may not have value as a marketable commodity, but there is no apple without it.

True capital is not the money we put into buildings as capital investment, but what arises from the unfolding of the creative potential of our children, through opportunities to play, to grow and to become truly creative members of society. Therein lies the key to the value of investing in our children.

Now, as well as asking the question 'Where Do Children Play?', I'm adding a request to policy makers and developers - Invest in our children, for play and for life.

## References

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3. Transparency International Report - [www.transparency.org.uk](http://www.transparency.org.uk)
4. The Rachel McMillan Nursery and Children's Centre - [www.rachelmcmillannursery.co.uk](http://www.rachelmcmillannursery.co.uk)
5. Convoys Wharf Development, Sayes Court - [www.sayescourt.org.uk](http://www.sayescourt.org.uk)
6. Tower Hamlets The Cow Garden pp 18 & 19 - [www.playtowerhamlets.org.uk/](http://www.playtowerhamlets.org.uk/)
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  - 9d Peter Gray 'The Play Deficit' - [aeon.co/essays/children-today-are-suffering-a-severe-deficit-of-play](http://aeon.co/essays/children-today-are-suffering-a-severe-deficit-of-play)
11. Joseph Beuys - <https://bellgallery.wordpress.com/2011/11/15/creativity-capital-by-joseph-beuys/>