Chapter 5

Children’s playgrounds

Places

Children need places, playgrounds, in order to invent and develop play. The reason for a phenomenological approach to the concept of ‘place’ in this work is to resist the demystification which takes place when the world becomes an object for natural science (Lauvland, 2007; Norberg-Schultz, 1992). The phenomenological approach to the concept of place disallows a total acknowledgment of what a place is. Human beings live situated lives. Some areas qualify as places; they are places on the basis of specific qualities. Places are points of orientation for people going hither or thither, and every place, defined as such, is limited by its surroundings.

A limited area cannot, though, be described as something isolated, even a limited area must be described as part of a larger environment, for instance a landscape, where we find it. A place exists in interaction and exchange with its surroundings; it depends on its surroundings (Greve, 1998; Ringaard, 2010).

I wrote about memories like this, from my own adolescence, in the introduction to this text. When I come back to my areas of childhood, I still can feel my stomach tickle. The body is a live thing. Authors like Kari Anne Jørgensen (2017), Torbjørn Lundhaug (Lundhaug & Sadownik, 2015) and Karen Klepsvik (Klepsvik & Heggen, 2015), have done much exciting research work on children’s outdoor activities.

Many scholars and professionals are of the opinion that playgrounds and places that are important to children and youth are of great significance. The activities that take place in a specific area give this area a certain identity to those who are familiar with it.

Edward ‘Ted’ Relph (1976), Canadian geographer, best known for his book *Place and Placelessness*, says that places’ identities are determined by three components: 1 the physical quality of the place, 2 the activity or activities which take place there and 3 what does the place mean to you?

The significance of the place is determined by those components and the way they join forces. It is a huge difference between ‘just another place’ and a place you remember for a reason and where you feel inside you what this place meant to you, and perhaps still does (Relph, 1976). Your own physical experiences at this place will
determine how you think about it, how you feel about it. If the place in question used
to be the arena for specific activities, you will always remember particular details that
were especially important for these activities. Still you may see the place, the play-
ground, in a new light. What you think of a place depends on how you remember it
and how important it was to you. The quality of your experiences with the place, and
how often you spent time there, may mean a lot for your affection for it.

A pioneer research worker on children’s places is American professor and psy-
chologist Roger Hart (1979). In his work *Children’s Experience of Place*, he wrote
about children’s experiences and understanding of outdoor places. He contacted
the children directly and visited their playgrounds. He discovered that children
have a strong urge to investigate their surroundings, and they often see ‘phenom-
enological landscapes’. This may mean that they are able to see totalities and pro-
fundities, and, as mentioned before, they can see different things thanks to their
keen eyes capable of seeing with creativity and imagination. A landscape may be
more than just a landscape. Hart was among the first to study children in this way.

In my own studies of play and places I experienced that children may have a
creative and poetic approach to reality. The games in the playroom (Gadamer,
2004) and the relation between body and playroom (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1994)
may express themselves in various ways. Children see what grown-ups do not.
They see that a certain tree looks like an animal, or they see climbing possibilities.
Some see flowers right away, wanting to pick them; others see materials useful for
building purposes.

Having spent time with children of various ages during woodland excursions, I
have observed that many are eager to crawl under, creep into, jump into whatever
they find. Children think of holes, caves and narrow spaces as very exciting, and
there they may create their imaginary worlds. It is important to understand that
some places stimulate children’s creativity and worlds of imagination, others do
not. The stimulating places often have special qualities; perhaps they allow the
children a little privacy, perhaps the children can hide there for a while, perhaps
they can move things and reshape them.

Some look upon nature as the best playground, inspiring to creative and imagi-
native play. The child needs, however, to feel naturally secure and confident in
such surroundings in order to truly benefit from them.

Personally, I find that the Framework Plan (2017) underestimates the impor-
tance of places’ and playgrounds’ significance, and also the qualities of different
indoors and outdoors spaces. The physical surroundings are important pedagogi-
cal resources and ‘silent helpers’, as Danish research workers Eva Gulløv and
Susanne Højlund write (2005).
Some spaces promote creativity, others hamper it. In my opinion loose natural materials promote play and creativity, as in Skauen (‘the Woodland’) kindergarten. The studies of Swedish research workers Patrik Grahn, Fredrika Mårtensson, Bodil Lindblad, Paula Nilsson and Anna Ekman (1997) have been important for research work on and development of children’s outdoor play in the Nordic countries. They did their field work when studying children’s outdoor play at two Swedish kindergartens. They concluded that the outdoor areas of Lekatten (‘the Weasel’) kindergarten probably were too poor to offer good conditions for imaginary play and calmer kinds of activities. The authors discussed whether the reasons for this ‘poverty’ were areas with few hiding places and a very plain, flat and somewhat boring playground. In addition, this playground was sectioned into areas reserved for specific purposes. The children also had to tidy the ground when they entered it; therefore they had to begin from the beginning every time. This might have affected their play, of course, giving few opportunities for continuous games.

Many playgrounds are so filled up with outdoor play equipment meant to sit on that there is very little space left to move around. When kindergartens are about to purchase playground equipment, it may be smart to consult the children, and also other kindergartens. What is their opinion? There is playground equipment that can be utilized in various ways, and what seems flexible may be useful. Other kinds of equipment tend to bore the children after a few times’ use. The way playground equipment is utilized also depends on the child group’s creativity and on the attitude of the employees; is this something worth having?

I say: keep as much natural wilderness as possible when planning a kindergarten’s outdoor areas. Any child will usually consider natural wilderness as something unique. Children tend to delve deeply; they see details grown-ups do not see. They can arrange and organize and give a place special significance. Hart (1979) writes: “… the major aim of the research was to discover the landscape as it exists for young children” (p. 4). In Hart’s opinion it is important to identify which physical surroundings’ qualities children prefer. One child prefers one kind of quality, another prefers another. Trees are often children’s favorite playthings, according to Hart, who wanted to find out what children actually felt about trees as objects of play. In addition, in Hart’s opinion, we ought to search for the links between activities, knowledge and feelings, and by means of such a general mentality we may better understand how children sense places.

We should attain a poetic relation to reality. Only seen poetically will life appear as understandable, thinks Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schultz (1996). A great interest of his is the relationship between people and their surroundings.
We are no longer able to see places poetically as well as we once used to do, is his opinion. Norberg-Schultz does not, as far as I know, write about children; he points, however, to artists as people who can open up and look at things and places with trained eyes. Perhaps children, too, have these keen eyes?

CHILDREN’S PLACES

Children need the places adults provide and prepare for them, but they need places of their own, too. Danish research worker Kim Rasmussen (2004) at Roskilde University Centre makes a point of the difference between ‘places for children’ and ‘children’s places’. The former are made by adults, the latter by the children themselves. ‘Children’s places’ I associate with nature, and Rasmussen, too, points to nature. Sometimes ‘children’s places’ are organized by grown-ups, but the children have re-arranged and re-organized the places to such an extent that
they no longer think of them as adult-made. Children pay a lot of attention to ‘children’s places’, places where they are active participants and developers. Often a ‘children’s place’ was discovered by the children themselves and developed by them. Here a number of children spend time together; they have their common experiences and their special feelings for the place (Rasmussen, 2004). I think of ‘children’s places’ as places children can inhabit (Norberg-Schultz, 1996).

In order to establish a relation to a place, you have to attach memories to it. A special place may be of great importance for children’s play: “It is by experimenting with their own bodies’ limitations and possibilities that children make themselves familiar with the room” (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992, p. 48).

Adults tend to prefer smooth lawns, sunny open spaces and tidiness. Unregulated and disorderly wilderness areas between dwelling areas, schools and supermarkets, for example, tend to be very attractive and exciting for children. In Norway the authorities try to clean up these ‘in-between areas’, which are such attractive playgrounds for children.

Rasmussen (2004) did some ‘walking interviews’ with 60 children who showed him their neighborhoods. The children showed him where they used to play, and they told him about games and everyday experiences.

Rasmussen writes about a place called ‘Bumbleby’ (‘Bumble City’, an imaginary name), a favorite of the two boys Anders and Karl. ‘Bumbleby’ makes them creative and playful. It is an extremely untidy place with innumerable branches, sprigs and tree trunks lying across the ground. The grass grows knee-high. The example of ‘Bumbleby’ illustrates what Rasmussen means with his concept ‘children’s place’. The place with its particular atmosphere and ‘spirit’ is quite indescribable. It is the children who make sense of such places; and they do it by using them, just knowing about them (which the adults do not) and attaching feelings to their places. Children tend to take a liking to places they have found or developed themselves. Their bodies show and tell them what kind of places these are, and where they are.

It is interesting to notice that Rasmussen has this physical approach in his research work. He is aware that children pay attention to and show interest in places which involve them physically and emotionally. They attach physically to a place by means of perception and feelings. The children are participants together, they create together, and only the children themselves may tell about their places to somebody else. Rasmussen (2004), like Hart (1979) and myself, discovered that children’s places usually are in their immediate vicinity, often right around the corner.

My studies tell me that children really do attach to special places, and I have discovered two concepts I find very useful in this regard: ‘body memory’ and ‘place
memory’ (Casey, 1997). If children are to make such attachments outdoors, outdoor activities must be given priority.

**NATURE’S DIRECT ADDRESS**

Our attitude to nature is shaped by our childhood experiences. Our understanding of nature is influenced by our choices of playgrounds and which games we choose to engage in. Animals, trees and plants are essential to children’s understanding of nature. In addition, nature to children represents life and activities (Hendricks, 2001). English special play area designer Barbara E. Hendricks points out that children think of order and organization differently from grown-ups. Children’s choice of playgrounds is according to Hendricks not the well-groomed parks, but rather wilderness and rugged terrain. Children think of rocks, slopes, creeks, rain, skies, wind and innumerable other things as exciting and thrilling, no matter the adult opinion of such phenomena (Hendricks, 2001).

*Å svar på naturens åpne tiltale* – ‘Responding to Nature’s Direct Address’ – is the title of Bjørn Tordsson’s doctoral thesis. He regards nature as something unique. Nature untouched is just that, untouched by the human hand. Nature as such offers few behavioral restrictions (Tordsson, 2003). Modern urbanity is shaped according to very specific intentions, while nature definitely is not. Nature addresses us directly and openly, and we may interpret it almost as we wish. Nature gives us no instructions, but a number of possibilities (Tordsson, 2009).

Different kindergartens will choose different kinds of wilderness surroundings for their excursions. We may select an open plain with a good general view, or we may go in for a more rugged area offering better hiding places, perhaps overspread with branches, twigs, tree trunks, weeds, rocks, etc. In a rugged area the interpretation possibilities will be many, and the individuals’ attention and their physically experienced understanding and sensibility will be crucial for their interpretation. Tordsson exemplifies by describing a marked course where we are told where to go and what to see and how to understand what we see. Here the possibilities of interpretation are taken away from us; what is outside the marked course in a way does not exist.

Places in nature invite us to be creative, to use our imagination, and to find our own ways of solving problems, writes Tovey (2007). My studies indicate that games stimulated by children’s imagination and creativity pop up more frequently when the children see the opportunities for hiding places, especially in woodland areas. Research workers Andrea Faber Taylor, Angela Wiley, Frances E. Kuo and William C. Sullivan (1998) at the University of Illinois, USA, discovered that
children played more complex games in areas rich in vegetation, and their games tended to be much simpler in areas lacking vegetation. Children’s imagination and creativity are stimulated by the opportunities offered by the surroundings. Nature’s abundance seems to offer stimulation enough. The possible numbers of interpretations are in effect innumerable! It is much easier to ‘see Indians’ among trees and bushes in the wilderness than in the kindergarten’s well-groomed playground.

Nature speaks to children because nature offers flexibility. Nature in summer and nature in winter are often two different things. One group of children and another group of children may be quite different. Places in nature may be utilized in this or that way.

Nature is something dynamic and vivid. Woodland areas are examples of dynamic and vivid places children often greatly appreciate.

Playgrounds filled with outdoor play equipment meant for very specific kinds of play may often offer limited opportunities (Taylor, Wiley, Kuo & Sullivan, 1998; Frost, 1992). Like Hart (1979) I discovered that the children fancied the ‘ready-made’ playground equipment for a short while only, but soon they rather preferred nearby areas of wilderness. Children show me from time to time that they are fond of creating and developing their own places. If they have access to materials to build with, they build shacks and dens. If the climbing wall is too easy to climb, they on purpose modify their climbing techniques in order to make it more difficult. Climbing frames or jungle-gyms offer few possibilities. Hart (1979) has discussed why many children soon give up their costly playground equipment, and in his opinion the reason is that those apparatuses usually permit only one way of utilization. This is not satisfying for children demanding the right to be creative.

Nature is a challenge, but also repetition and recognition. A particular climbing tree was used for climbing three years ago, too, and that slope was used for sliding down also last year. The tree and the slope have been there for many, many years, they may not look quite the same now as years ago, but they are definitely that tree and that slope. Kindergarten children and pupils alike have wilderness playgrounds which are very precious to them. That I can see by observing the ways they spend their time there and how they refer to them.

Relph (1976) and Norberg-Schultz (1996) have been criticized for having a too romantic view of their places of play. In my opinion, children in fact do have a rather romantic relation to their special places. Buytendijk (1933) describes children’s relations to their places of play as strongly emotional. This is why I will present an example from one very specific place.
THE CLIMBING TREE IN THE WOODLAND

This example is from my studies of pupils, school children (Fasting, 2012, 2013). However, the example presented would not have been much different if the children in question had belonged to a kindergarten. Kindergarten children also build shacks and dens, and their shacks may be underground as well as high up in a tree.

This particular tree was about ten meters tall, with a lot of branches which made it easy to climb. The lowest branches were, however, a bit high up on the trunk, which made the climbing a little difficult at first. After this difficult start the rest was easy, as the branches were many and evenly distributed along the trunk.

Ole and two more boys from class were keen climbers, going so far up between the branches they could hardly be glimpsed. I could see that the boys already were experienced climbers. Let us see what Merleau-Ponty (1994) says about letting things become a part of the body: The tree became like extended parts of the climbing boys’ bodies. During the days I spent with the children in that woodland, they spent a considerable amount of time up in that tree. They sort of calmed down

IMAGE 9: Boys in a tree. Photo: Merete Lund Fasting.
there, they expressed a very close relation to ‘their’ tree, and of course to each other. Perhaps it was important for them that climbing that tree was not altogether very easy. Climbing it was rather a demanding task; that tree was not for everyone.

The boys hung their knapsacks up in the tree, securing access to food, drink and clothes. The tree was rich in branches pointing in all directions, and although it was an evergreen the children seldom got stung on the needles, as these were concentrated mainly at the extreme ends of the branches. A ten-meter-tall tree gave them a thrilling opportunity to climb high up in the air; they really had a good time climbing, talking and laughing.

Safe climbing depends to a certain degree on a minimum of technical ability. Those boys knew what to do, they were very conscious about where to move their feet, which branches to seize hold of, observing their bodies’ centers of gravity. The tree became a kind of ‘second home’ to them; they spent time there together, talking, eating and drinking with friends and playmates. They knew what they were doing, they had everything under control, they felt perfectly safe. The tree even sheltered them from rain.

I recall that Norberg-Schultz (1999) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) use the concept *dwelling* to describe the relation between people and places. The children felt at home in the tree.

What do children think of being able to climb as high up as they want, without grown-ups telling them to be careful or ordering them down? The children love it! To have the opportunity to spend as much time in a favorite tree as they please, is a treat. The boys were laid-back, no particular tasks awaited them, life was nothing but relaxation. They were never bored; this was all fun! The tree was a social place, but a secretive place, too, because quite many of the others could not gain access to it. Their teacher could not observe them, a fact that surely might be of importance. Yet the tree was strategically rooted; the boys could observe other children playing on the ground in the vicinity. That was perhaps a little exciting, too, to observe and to be observed by other children.

What was more important than anything else was the difference between being up in the tree and being down on the ground. The difference in excitement between being up there and down here (Norberg-Schultz, 1993) was noticeable for a person standing down on the ground observing the boys up in the tree.

The boys behaved like parts of the tree, moving along in dialogue with the branches. The branches were their ‘furniture’; there they talked, moved about a bit, finding new positions, resuming their talking. No one tried to shake the branches, making it difficult for their mates. Everyone cooperated, moving around
in a kind of unity. They were in dialogue with the tree and with each other. Swapping places necessitated cooperation. What does this tell us about the children’s feelings for their tree?

I never asked them, but the way they behaved, the way they moved about and the way they communicated with the tree, convinced me that they were closely attached to it. The boys sat very relaxed on quite thin branches, they moved about, everyone in a comfortable mood.

How can we give children such opportunities in the kindergarten playgrounds? Should we let the self-confident and clever climbers climb trees, and let those not so clever have the opportunity to practice?

**CHILDREN’S PLACES AND THEIR RULES**

Are there rules attached to children’s outdoor places of play? Do we have rules taking care of children’s requirements for motion, creativity and play?

In Norway we have as part of certain laws something called guidelines relating to national politics. Guidelines are not laws, but they are of great significance when it comes to deciding how many square meters a child should have at its disposal in the kindergarten. Today these guidelines indicate that any child should have an area of $4 \times 6 \text{ meters} = 24 \text{ square meters}$ to its outdoors disposal. Indoors it is four square meters for every child (which is to be multiplied by six for outdoor activities). Asbjørn Flemmen is one of those who criticize that children’s access to a defined minimum of outdoor space at kindergartens and schools is not regulated by law. He comments that animals in fact do have this kind of protection.

Norway’s capital is Oslo, and the average size of the outdoor areas of Oslo’s kindergartens is diminishing, along with the square meters per child. Kindergartens built after 2006 have 12.6 square meters less outdoor area per child, compared to kindergartens built before 1975. In comparison, the number of parking lots remains unaltered, by and large.

The public debate about the size of children’s outdoor spaces seems to have caused a great deal of reduction of these spaces (Nilsen, 2014). What, then, are the probable pedagogical consequences of building kindergartens with quite small outdoor areas? The consequences are probably that children will have much poorer conditions for high-quality outdoor play at those kindergartens.

We want kindergarten children to play outdoors because, among other things, the air quality almost always is much better outdoors than indoors. Children still have no Working Environment Act. Although the present government (2019) has promised to give priority to such an act, the process has not yet progressed very
far. This means that children so far have very few rights when it comes to air quality, the qualities of their indoors and outdoors premises and the qualities of anything else regarding kindergarten children.

**CHILDREN’S PATHS**

Barnetråkken is a digital tool accessible to all Norwegian municipalities. This tool is used to register which areas children prefer for their activities, and these areas are marked off on relevant maps. The ‘Children’s Paths’ tool was developed in order to improve municipal methods of planning to the benefit of children and youth, and in order to support children’s and youth’s own participation in this kind of planning. The idea is that children and youth are entitled to speak their minds about the quality of their ways to and from schools and spare time areas, about the quality of their playgrounds and children’s places, and about areas they just like or dislike. It should also be within their rights to propose physical changes in order to improve neighborhoods and vicinities, as seen from children’s and youths’ points of view.

**IMAGE 10:** Snow is exciting! Photo: Merete Lund Fasting
This digital tool is supposed to make municipalities better planners. It is also supposed to give children and young people real opportunities for participation in development work and in the improvement of their own environment. The ‘Children’s Paths’ digital tool is looked upon as important for training in democracy, for the development of personal identity and also for teaching the youngsters the importance of responsibility and participation.

**RISK ANALYSIS**

*Risk analysis* is about working painstakingly to eliminate all kinds of dangers and risks that may possibly occur when you, the kindergarten professional, are about to take a group of children out for an excursion. You should thoroughly examine all routines. Which colleague is responsible for what? Who brings the first aid kit? Do you have all the parents’ mobile numbers at hand?

We should have a phenomenological approach to risk analysis. We should use a fair amount of time to discuss and understand various phenomena. We tend to want to eliminate every risk imaginable, but at the same time we should be concerned about children’s participation; we know that children often are explorers, adventurers and risk takers. At the same time, we must bear in mind what kinds of harms and injuries we may face, and what kinds of injuries we are most likely to have to face.

What are our routines when we have to cross streets and roads? What are our routines when we pass close by ponds, lakes, creeks and rivers? By slopes, crevices and waterfalls? We should think of internal control routines concerning the outdoor spaces at the kindergarten, too.

What we, the professionals, may allow children to do and expose themselves to, will vary. A group of ten is something else than a group of five; we tend to be more restrictive when we have to look after ten children. Some kindergartens permit those children who cope to climb trees, and children who do not cope will have to practice more before they are allowed to climb. Rules may of course be flexible and adjustable.

I like the idea of flexible rules in order to stimulate children’s agility. There is, for instance, this kindergarten where the toddlers are allowed to run as much as they can in the corridors between 9 and 10 a.m. And should it be allowed to throw snowballs in the kindergarten’s back yard if everyone who is there is aware of the risk of getting hit?

At schools with more children and fewer adults, such flexible rules are more difficult to practice.
REFERENCES


