An introduction

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In this book, you are about to meet people who are passionate about environments for children. The environments of children are not always environments for children: in many cases, the places where children grow up, play, and learn are, at best, designed for them by adults, at worst they are the spaces left over from the ‘adult world’. So it is not surprising that many researchers in this area do not remain neutral, but instead take an involved, action-orientated stance in their work.

Environmental psychology has indeed become one of the least neutral areas of the discipline of psychology, striving to work for better environments, working to discover the correlates of well-being, arming designers with the information that they need about people’s needs and perceptions, and providing the tools for evaluating places and buildings as they affect behaviour and well-being.

Theories and applications

We have asked the author of each chapter to review theories of children’s perceptions of space and place, and to show applications to the world of children. So, for example, Edward Cornell and Kenneth Hill apply the literature about children’s developing ideas of themselves in geographical space to predict what children are most likely to do if they find themselves lost in the outdoors. This is research that has immediate practical importance for advising police search teams on how far a child is likely to have wandered.

Another example: basic research in environmental psychology is confirming people’s intuition that places are fundamental to the child’s developing self-concept and identity. Environmental psychology has investigated how we can discern what are the most important features of familiar places, and how varied they can be. In this book, for example, comparisons of rural and urban children show just how different these features can be, and we have chapters about children in New Mexico (Tori Derr), in Finland and Belarus (Marketta Kytta), and in different...
parts of the UK (Charlotte Clarke and David Uzzell; Hugh Matthews and Faith Tucker).

In a closely related field, Andrea Faber Taylor and Frances Kuo ask whether contact with nature and with animals is important for healthy child development. Such a relationship is popularly assumed to be the case: but does the evidence support such an assumption? Taylor and Kuo provide a review of the steadily accumulating evidence for a positive link.

Several chapters in the book discuss theory relating to children’s concepts of small and large scale spaces. Scott Bell reviews theory on scale and describes differences in the way that children behave in differently sized spaces. Beverly Plester gives young children an aerial photograph of their school playgrounds as a way to finding out about the children's spatial abilities, and Sandra Martin’s chapter focuses on the world of teachers and pupils in a school classroom. On a larger scale Martyn Barrett, Evanthis Lyons and Alison Bourchier-Sutton investigate what children know about their own and other countries in Europe.

Several chapters consider the ecological psychologists’ concept of ‘affordances’. In other words, the properties and possibilities that places can provide for those users, whether or not those possibilities were originally envisioned by the designers and planners. Harry Heft and Louise Chawla discuss the concept of affordances, and other chapters show how such a concept can be of use to those designing child-friendly places (Mark Francis and Ray Lorenzo; Marketta Kytta). Indeed, one of the major practical issues in our field is how to work with children on the design of these child-friendly places. What would engage them and facilitate their creativity? How to go beyond a mere tokenism? Sharon Sutton and Susan Kemp show us how to use the ‘charette’ to engage children as full members of their community in the physical renewal of their neighbourhood; and Liisa Horelli proposes a community-based ‘learning network’ as another technique.

Themes running through the book

All topics in this book relate to the world as perceived and lived by children. The environmental psychology tradition is to work ‘in the real world’ as much as possible, rather than working with reduced laboratory based stimuli. For this reason all the chapters in this book focus on children in large real world spaces; the type of places that children live in, explore, and learn from. These include classrooms,
playgrounds, homes and yards, towns, communities, countryside, natural environments and the wider world.

As one of the pioneers of real world work with children, Roger Hart (1997) has said, children’s daily lives are complex, unique, and inherently spatial. Learning about the whereabouts of things such as resources, support, and dangers is obviously a vital survival skill for any species, even for one with a relatively long dependency phase such as humans have. So too is the capacity for realizing the potential of places and objects, and the affordances that they offer.

Given the complexity of the world children inhabit, and the range of aspirations and objectives that they have in using the world, one of the first issues is to see how this complexity can be structured in a way that makes information about the world easier to handle. Developmental psychology has already given us good accounts of how such structuring takes place; from the early integrative templates formed in infancy, before the child has the opportunity for self-locomotion, through the phases of early exploration of limited spaces of house and

Figure 0.1. The affordances and challenges of the built environment: a place for children?
garden, through to the older child’s expanding knowledge of locality, neighbourhood, town and region; and increasing awareness of places beyond direct acquaintance.

Some devices can support understanding of spatial relationships beyond that which is immediately viewable. Scott Bell discusses the way that geographical space can be made clear by representations like maps, models; and how children can make decisions using such representations. Beverley Plester uses aerial photographs to show that even young children are capable of developing search strategies using a representation that is in many ways transformed from the child’s ground-level experience. The evidence is strong that the use of symbolic representations of space is developed early in childhood.

Another theme that pervades many chapters is that of the competence of the child in handling the complexities of space and place: it is generally an underestimated competence as far as the adult world is concerned. This is highlighted in the chapters on children's participation in planning. Several authors show that children, including young ones,
can be effectively involved in designing and planning environments, especially ones that are most relevant to them.

Even in cases showing children’s apparent incompetence (for example, in the chapter on lost children), what is noticeable is the early emergence of strategic thinking about space. What leads to ‘becoming lost’ and disorientated is often an episode where way finders encounter an unexpected scene or path, or when they cannot find a particular landmark. Case studies of children who have realized that they have become lost indicate that many children can then adopt a goal-oriented problem solving strategy.

The variation in children’s experiences is another of this book’s themes: it is highlighted by Tori Derr in her chapter, and elaborated on by many of the other contributors. Mainstream psychology has a tendency to underplay variety, and to look for generalities; but, happily, environmental psychology is aware of (and in some cases, celebrates) diversity. Recent studies of children’s environments have increasingly recognized that this variety in children’s experiences shapes their learning, social development, and play. Not surprisingly, different childhood settings have different affordances; but less obvious is the finding that in the same setting, children’s experiences may differ significantly. Family circumstances and all the usual social factors will impact; but a central factor is the child’s own pattern of activities. Active exploration characterizes some children much more than it does others, and such exploration not only increases place knowledge but also develops the child’s strategies for acquiring and integrating that knowledge.

Children also differ in the extent that they, to borrow Tori Derr’s phrase, place-makers, use this ‘as a means of looking inward, of establishing something of their own and developing a sense of self’. Individuals may also be more or less sensitive to places. Little (1987) has suggested place/person specialism as an important dimension in adults, and we should add it to the research agenda for those working with children. There is also clear evidence that children differ in their environmental sensitivities, which may perhaps relate to their experience of caring for animals, gardens, etc. (see the chapters by Derr, and by Taylor and Kuo). This links to the chapter by Heft and Chawla, who ask directly what experiences prepare children to value and care for their local environment, and to join in with community decision making. Local residents’ expert knowledge, they argue, should guide environmental planning and decision making; and children have a share in this expertise.
What the child's environment affords

Children may then differ in what they bring to their environments: and equally, places differ in the extent to which they are child friendly, offering opportunities for independent mobility and for actualizing the affordances. Kytta offers us an analytic typology for thinking about places in terms of these two dimensions, with 'Bullerby' (author Astrid Lindgren's noisy village) as the ideal type. Several of the chapters offer anthropological-detail studies of what such different environments are like in practice, whether for younger children in rural and urban New Mexico (Derr), prosperous urban south of England (Clarke and Uzzell) or less prosperous rural areas in the English Midlands (Matthews and Tucker). Lessons learned in each setting often tie the child into the local way of life and the cultural convergence of narratives, histories, and social identities.

What places afford we argue is not just important for the child's here-and-now ('This place is exciting' . . . through to. . . 'I'm bored!'), but also for their long-term personal cognitive and emotional development. There is now a growing body of literature that evidences what children gain from their experiences of places: ranging from those 'special places' which allow for the imagination, and a sense of personal control and freedom, to those social venues where one can learn about one's community, and be recognized by others for one's part in it. Designing and supporting places which maximize the chances for a child's cognitive and social development are therefore another campaigning issue where environmental psychology can offer convincing evidence, in support of those arguing for the rights of the child.

Mindful of this are those who raise alarms at the increasingly inactive, computer screen-focused lives of many contemporary children, and it is not just sunshine and fresh air that children are missing out on as over-anxious parents restrict their children's exploratory travel. Antonella Rissotto and Vittoria Giuliani write about the loss of children's experiences of their local environments in this modern world. Francis and Lorenzo write with alarm that in many parts of the developed world, children are increasingly disappearing from the urban scene: they are not using public space, or only doing so under much greater adult surveillance than would have occurred in earlier generations. As a result, children have lost street-sense and city-knowledge. Francis and Lorenzo's chapter offers us a checklist of qualities of city design for children. These include easy accessibility of resources from home; mixed use rather than strictly zoned; with a density and a patterning that allows for more opportunities for encounters, not only with known
friends but also with a wider community. These authors share with Hart (1997) the vision of children not as a separate society, but as making decisions with the adolescents and adults of their community in a proactive process.

To take another example: rural areas are often idealized as places to grow up in, but they too have become less satisfying. In their interviews, Matthews and Tucker heard many British adults describing the perceived benefits of a rural upbringing, saying that children can grow up and develop in settings that enable a close association with nature. But this was a view that rural teenagers rarely shared: they instead talked of the restrictions on their movements, and the lack of things to do. Many of the visible natural spaces have been ‘fenced-off’ by adults as private land, which is often fiercely defended by the adults of the community.

As described above, children can benefit from or feel restricted by their experience of their local environment. Children can also learn from experience of more distant environments, as when they travel abroad to another country (as discussed in Barrett et al.’s chapter). Such travel might be thought to have positive effects upon children’s knowledge and attitudes, but the evidence so far is mixed. One cannot conclude that travel inevitably broadens a child’s mind, but this may depend on the quality of the child’s experience when abroad.

Similarly the evidence for the impact of formal education on attitudes and beliefs about distant lands is mixed. There is no straight-line relationship between knowledge and tolerance. Indeed, as many studies of teaching materials and textbooks have shown, the selectivity of environmental images that a child sees as ‘representative’ of a country may actually emphasize the strangeness and difference of that country compared to the child’s own familiar world (see, for example, Blaut’s 1993 polemic about the images used in geography textbooks).

**From childhood into adolescence**

Without conducting a rigorous survey, it is clear to us that the number of studies on environments for children outweighs the number of studies focusing on adolescents. Indeed, Clarke and Uzzell believe that their chapter is the first-ever review of adolescents’ use and evaluation of their environments. They, like other contributors, find the concept of affordances (see above) a useful one for assessing the adolescent experience of urban areas. Not surprisingly, the needs and experiences here are in some ways similar to those of younger children; but in other ways, given expanding horizons and aspirations, importantly different. And as such,
given limitations in social access to urban resources, adolescents may well find themselves less satisfied by the town’s affordances than they had been when they were younger.

In general, Western cities do not seem as aware of adolescents’ needs as they are of children’s, nor is there as much advocacy for adolescents. As Chawla’s (2002) UNESCO study showed, this is true for other areas of the world as well. Are there, Clarke and Uzzell ask, sufficient urban niches for adolescents to select compatible ones for themselves; or does the town have sufficient flexibility to allow them to shape a place to their own needs? Some of the niches may be the casual ones of childhood, adapted; some may be the commercially provided ones of cafes and sports areas, not ignoring schools (where much of the week is likely to be spent) and the home (which remains important as a place of retreat and restoration).

How can adolescents communicate their ideas to the planners and decision makers? Horelli’s chapter includes a description of her learning-based network approach — one in which young people and adults took part in what Horelli described as interdependent actor networks. Complainers became agents of change, and local changes in resources for young people did indeed result.

So many themes cross the fifteen chapters of the book that we have only attempted a loose organization into four sections. First, we consider children’s understanding of places: environmental perception and cognition. Next, we look at children’s experience of places, all the way from the classroom to the natural world; and reflect on recent changes in the child’s world. Similarly, the two chapters on the adolescent experience, in country and in town, ask what quality of experience is available to them. Then in the final section, we move from current affordances to the future worlds and children’s part in their planning and design.

Not all our chapters ‘join up’ yet. This is because the ‘environmental psychology’ of childhood and adolescence is still a new and developing field, and researchers come from diverse backgrounds including education, sociology, geography, and planning, as well as psychology. (We have for simplicity’s sake referred to the field as environmental psychology, and apologise to anyone who feels colonized by this). Nonetheless, despite the diversity of authors in this book there is already a remarkable level of consensus between them, and the variety of methods and approaches that these different researchers bring to the study of children in the real world is a strength of the field. And what links our authors most of all, as we said at the outset, is a passionate commitment to children and their environments.
References


Part I

Children’s understanding of places