

Roy Kozlovsky, Princeton University School of Architecture

Paper presented at the Threat and Youth Conference, Teachers College, April 1, 2006

The Junk Playground: creative destruction as antidote to delinquency

This paper examines the Junk Playground from the perspective of architectural and urban history, in order to historicize the ways in which *play* was promoted as an antidote to delinquency, by framing its history and practice in relation to a discourse on citizenship. Perhaps the notion that playgrounds can prevent aggression would appear to us today as naïve, but in certain important respects, it provides a critical reflection on our contemporary methods of organizing the urban environment to combat delinquency.

The concept of the junk playground was invented by a Danish landscape architect, Carl Theodor Sorensen, whose lifetime project was to transform the status of the park from an object of aesthetic contemplation into a site of active and participatory recreation. Following his observation that children were attracted to construction sites and junk yards, he proposed to enclose a space, supply it with building materials, discarded objects and tools, and allow the children to build the playground according to their own ideas and for their own pleasure.



Figure 1: Junk Playground at Emdrup, Copenhagen 1943.

Sorensen's idea was first tested in 1943 during the German occupation, as part of a social housing project in Emdrup, Copenhagen. Play was seen as preventive in two ways: firstly, it prevented the so-called rough and difficult children from drifting into marginality by occupying them in constructive play. Secondly, there was an agreement that the occupation gave rise to delinquency because it created an atmosphere of moral confusion and blurred the distinction between sabotage and asocial behavior. To reinstate a sense of community, play was designed to encourage communal solidarity through the democratic practice of self-government. Although the housing estate management employed a play supervisor, he refrained from assuming a position of authority. Everyday dilemmas such as what to build and what to demolish, the sharing of tools and building materials, how to resolve disagreements and fights peacefully, were up to the participants themselves. Bertlesen, Emdrup's first play leader, declared that 'the initiative must come from the

children themselves... I cannot, and indeed will not, teach the children anything.¹ Hence they developed their own building projects, demolished them after they got tired of them, and began anew. Thus Sorensen commented that of all the landscapes he designed, the junk playground was by far the ugliest, but also the best, because of the kind of experience and pleasure it made possible, rather than its aesthetic contribution to the city.

However, it is the English who are responsible for making the junk playground into a worldwide phenomena, as well as providing it with a more respectable name, the Adventure Playground. In what follows, I will focus on its English history, in order to examine the relation between play, violence and citizenship.



Figure 2: Lady Allen of Hurtwood, "Why Not Use Our Bomb Sites Like This?" *Picture Post*, November 16, 1946

Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a landscape architect, pacifist and children's welfare advocate visited Emdrup right after the war and introduced it to the English public in her 1946 essay in the *Picture post*, as a solution to the wartime problem of Juvenile delinquency. Hurtwood adds to the Danish precedent the idea that these playgrounds would be built on bombed sites destroyed by the Blitz. In her proposal, the junk playground is made into a narrative for postwar reconstruction, as a healing process in which the physical and psychological damage of the war are to be playfully cured.

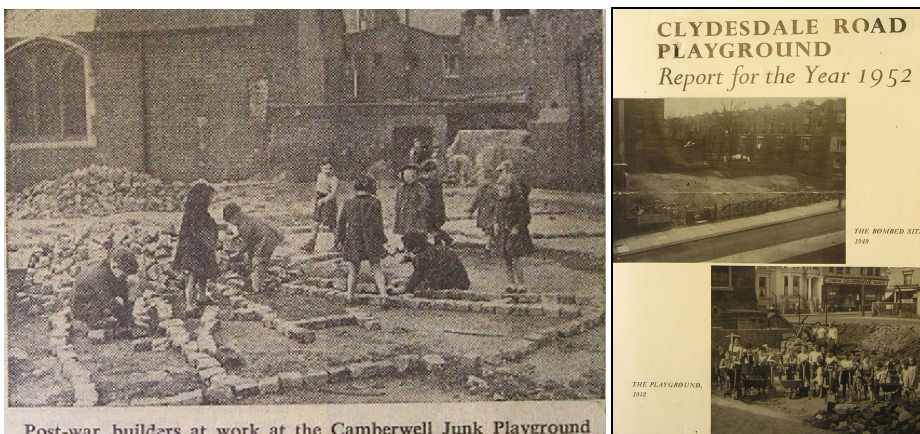


Figure 3: First two junk playgrounds in England: Camberwell, South London (1948), and Clydesdale, north London (1949).

¹ Quote from Bertelsen's playground log book from 1945, in Arvid Bengtsson, *Adventure Playground* (New York, Praeger, 1972), 20.

The first two playgrounds were opened in London in 1948 and 1949, one on the site of a bombed church in Cumberwell, the other on a bombed dwelling in Paddington. These experiments were closely followed by the press, city inspectors, educationalists and radical social scientists.

In the following decade, most of these playgrounds, now renamed as Adventure Playgrounds, were closed when the property was returned to its legal owners for development. While adventure playgrounds still exist to this day, they have a different purpose and meaning than that of the original junk playground.

I would now examine why this kind of *play* was promoted as an antidote to delinquency, and what does it tell us about how the root causes of aggression were perceived. I will first compare it with the kind of play which was promoted by the turn of the century Play Centre movement, to demonstrate how play changes its nature along with the change in the perception of both violence and citizenship.

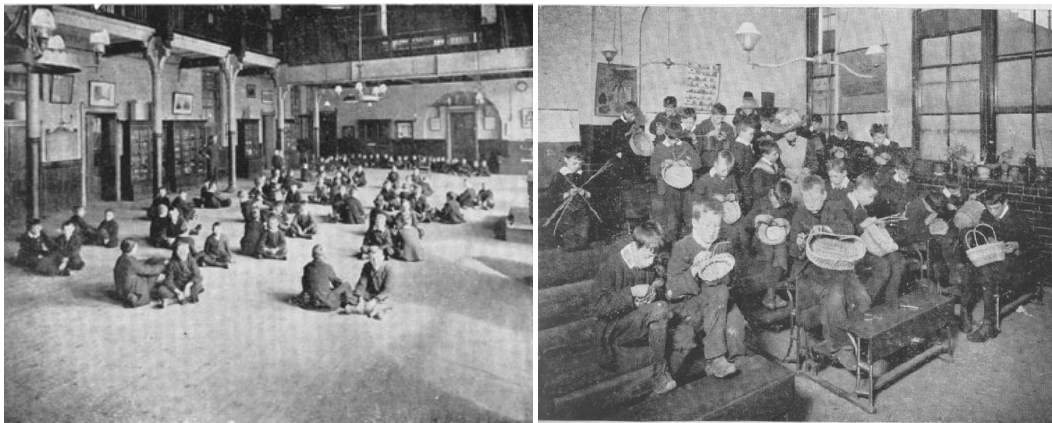


Figure 4: The Play Centre: 'position for ground handball', and 'basket-work class'

The institution of the Play Centre emerges in tandem with child-labor reforms and compulsory schooling policies aimed at the children of the urban working classes. Its preventive strategy was to constitute a separate space for childhood to dissociate lower classes youth from the street and its demoralizing influences. Play was also perceived as a civilizing force that can counter the effects of urbanization upon the morality and character of the poor, by engaging their children in group games and craft oriented hobbies, in the hope that an ordered and rule-bound activity will install in them the discipline, character and skills needed for a respectable way of life. With the expansion of voting rights to the working classes and later to women, play was modified to introduce these populations into the values and conduct of a liberal mode of democratic citizenship, encapsulated by the concept of 'fair play'.² Most of all, the play centre was a proto-welfare institution, in which its workers examined the child's individual behavior and character in relation to the economic and social

² Thus Walter Wood, a barrister by profession, advocates the reforming of feminine play with the following statement: 'Women have not the civic virtues of loyalty and surrender of self to a common cause. They are individualistic, and emotional rather than judicial, hence they do not easily see the importance of rules or the need to obey them... Civilisation however, is coming to require more and more the civic virtues from women, and this is one reason why we should encourage team games amongst adolescent girls.' Walter D. Wood, *Children's Play and its Place in Education* (London: Kegan Paul, 1915), 187

conditions at home, in order to study and address the underlying causes for poverty and crime. Thus with the institution of a separate juvenile court system in 1907, its first probation officers were recruited from play centre workers.³ If we compare the images of play in the play centre and the junk playground, the most obvious difference is the substitution of a structured, ordered pattern of play with that of informal, and apparently spontaneous play.

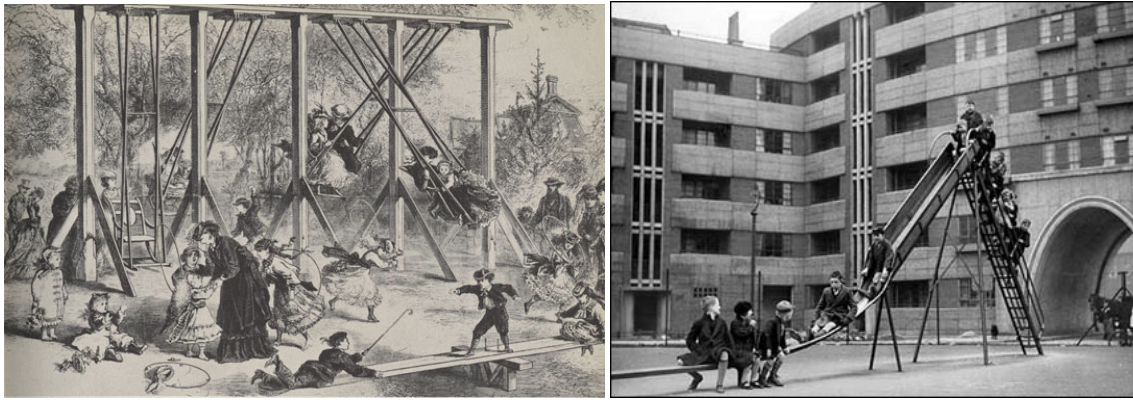


Figure 5: Central Park playground, 1871, and Quarry Hills Estate playground, Leeds, 1937.

And if we compare it with the conventional playground equipped with slides, seesaws, sandpits and swings, which predates to the 19th century, the difference is that while in the common playground, the equipment determines the activity by engaging the child through a bodily pleasure that is essentially kinetic, in the junk playground the meaning and use of the equipment is determined by the child, and the pleasure it induces comes out of the mastery and manipulation of the environment.

My argument is that the promotion of this kind of pleasure, this kind of disordered play, is anchored in two conflicting perspectives on delinquency and citizenship.

The first is the idea that destruction and violence are not inherent to human nature, nor are they caused by lapses in discipline and order, but are expressions of human agency and the drive for self-fulfillment that have been suppressed. A representative of this approach is Charles Baudelaire, who in his essay “A Philosophy of Toys”, discussed the tendency of children to destroy their toys as a revolutionary and poetic act:

The overriding desire of most children is to get at and *see the soul* of their toys, some at the end of a certain period of use, others *straightaway*. It is on the more or less swift invasion of this desire that depends the length of life of a toy. I do not find it in me to blame this infantile mania; it is a first metaphysical tendency...The child twists and turns his toy, scratches it, shakes it, bumps it against the wall, throws it on the ground. From time to time he makes it re-start its mechanical motions, sometimes in the opposite direction. Its marvellous life comes to a stop. The child, like the people besieging the Tuileries, makes a supreme effort; at last he opens it up, he is stronger. But *where is the soul*? This is the beginning of melancholy and gloom.⁴

For Baudelaire, destructive play is epistemophilic, a creative, poetic act of producing knowledge

³ Kevin Brehony, “A “Socially Civilizing Influence”? Play and the Urban ‘Degenerate’”, *Paedagogica Historica*, Vol. 39, No. 1/2, (2003), 103

⁴ Charles Baudelaire, “A Philosophy of Toys,” *The Painter of Modern life and other essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), 203

through experimentation, in opposition to the passive reception of readymade forms of knowing the world. It is revolutionary also in the sense that the object in itself has no value beyond its ‘use’ value—destructive play is egalitarian. Following Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin saw in children’s play with detritus materials in construction sites and industrial waste as communistic, since it disrupted the class system based on the division of labour, and suggested an alternative model for inhabiting the world, by remaking it in miniature.⁵ Likewise, Johan Huizinga emphasized the potlatch dimension of play, as a wasteful and pleasurable activity that is devoid of material interest or profit—play as an alternative to the economic logic of capitalistic accumulation.⁶ The proponents of the adventure playground expand upon this conception of play, to claim that destructive behavior should not be discussed in terms of morality or discipline, but rather in those of agency and experience.



Figure 6: St. John’s Wood Adventure Playground, London

The junk playground aims to provide an environment where the players can take risks, experiment with fire, build, fail and destroy, as a way of knowing the world empirically, through doing.

Hurtwood specifically located the root cause of delinquency in modern environments and modern forms of childhood that deprive children of the opportunities for constructive and meaningful experience. In Emdrup she found a confirmations

that delinquency is generally a form of rebellion against thoughtless, unimaginative treatment. All children need manifold opportunity to express their inventive energies, and the Emdrup

⁵ In a section of *One Way Street* titled ‘Construction Site’, Benjamin writes: “For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked upon. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry... In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.” Walter Benjamin, *Reflections* (New York : Schocken, 1978.) 68. In “Old Toys; the Toy Exhibition at the Markisches Museum” Benjamin writes that “we must not forget that the most enduring modifications in toys are never the work of adults, whether they be educators, manufacturers, or writers, but are the result of children at play. Once mislaid, broken, and repaired, even the most princely doll becomes a capable proletarian comrade in the children’s play commune.” Walter Benjamin *Selected writings*, vol. II (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996-), 111

⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* ((London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 13

playground demonstrated how to give these opportunities. Without them, armies of delinquencies are likely to go on marching into the juvenile courts.⁷

Violence is an expression of an unlived life, a human potential that was not allowed to fully develop. The use of anarchy as the pre-condition for the playground activity had a political subtext, as an alternative strategy for shaping society from the bottom up, through the agency of the subject rather than top down social planning. Marxists who after the War began to dissociate themselves from Stalinism, believed they found in the junk playground a 'verification' of their political approach, which sought to ground human relations on the principle of autonomy rather than upon authority.⁸ Change in the model of citizenship necessitates a change in the practice of play, from an emphasis on order and rules to a stress on self-regulation and creativity.

The second type of discourse which informs the reception of the junk playground in England draws from the psychological conception of violence and play. If classical criminology addresses the act, and seeks to deter it through punishment, and social criminology locates it in the behavior and material conditions of a specific class, which becomes the subject of reform, the 'new psychology' located the root causes of crime in the emotional disorder of the individual, brought about by a lack of parental emotional care or unresolved childhood conflicts. This alters the ways in which play was to be practiced in order to prevent delinquency. Social workers begin to observe and interpret the play of children in play centres and clinics as a means for mapping the emotional makeup of the delinquent. Secondly, play in itself assumed a therapeutic function. Freud argued that the pleasure children derive from play is rooted in repeating a traumatic experience and mastering it, often by revenging on a substitute.⁹ Play, as catharsis, purges disruptive emotions and canalizes dangerous instincts. But the stakes of play are higher, since psychoanalysis established an analogy between individual aggression and collective, political violence, both rooted in a metaphysical conception of human nature as the eternal conflict between eros, the force of attraction, and the builder of cities, and the death drive, the force of destruction and disintegration. During the Second World War, the playground was conceptualized as one of the places where the conflict between civilization and barbarism, democracy and totalitarianism, was waged in miniature. This conception informs the emergence of a new type of play, but first we should familiarize ourselves with the wartime context which made delinquency ever more visible and a problem that demanded the attention of policy makers.

⁷ Allen of Hurtwood, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), 196

⁸ A separate issue of the English journal *Anarchy* was devoted to the adventure playground in 1961. Colin Ward, in his lead essay "Adventure Playground: a parable of anarchy", defined the playground as 'a free society in miniature' *Anarchy* no. 7 (September 1961), 194

⁹ 'As the child passes from the passivity of the experience to the activity of the game, he hands on the disagreeable experience to one of his playmates and in this way revenges himself on a substitute.' Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1989), 16

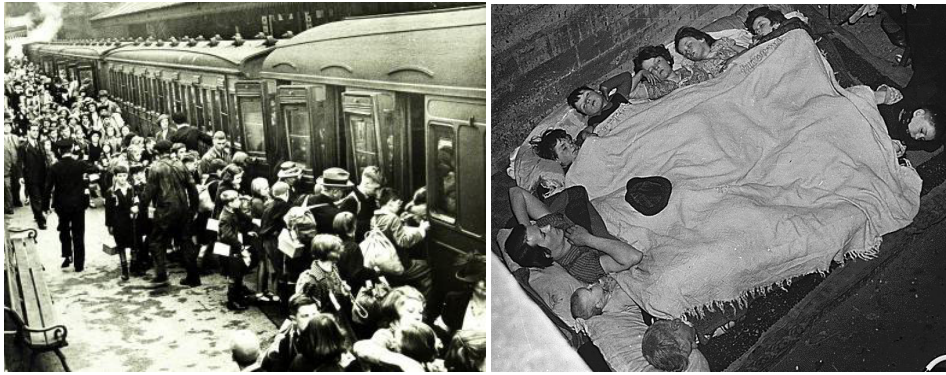


Figure 7: the evacuation of children, 1939. Life in underground shelters, 1941

During the Second World War there was a marked intolerance to asocial and violent acts committed by youth, which were seen to be on the rise. There was a collective anxiety as to the effects of separating children from their parents, caused by the wartime policy of evacuation, and the overcrowding in the air raid shelters, which was thought to have weakened parental control. Moreover, there was the worry that a generation of children which experienced wartime brutality would grow up approving of violence. The Camberwell playground chairman stated this concern as the prime reason for this form of play:

Finally, and most importantly, playgrounds such as ours set in a district which has suffered much during the war can lead a child away from the tolerance and approval of that destruction which is associated with the war. The child of nine or ten makes few moral judgments. He wants to do something and it is the doing which is absorbing, whether it is constructive or destructive, I believe he prefers to make and this is supported by our observations, but given nothing to make he will break. It lies in our power to assist him in choosing what is socially desirable and morally right.¹⁰

Unruly behavior of children was especially disturbing in over-crowded shelter, and the authorities were compelled to compensate them over the loss of outdoor play, by introducing play centers into the shelters. This is the background of the work of Marie Paneth, an Austrian educator and a student of Carl Cizek, which provides the theoretical foundation for the postwar reception of the junk playground.

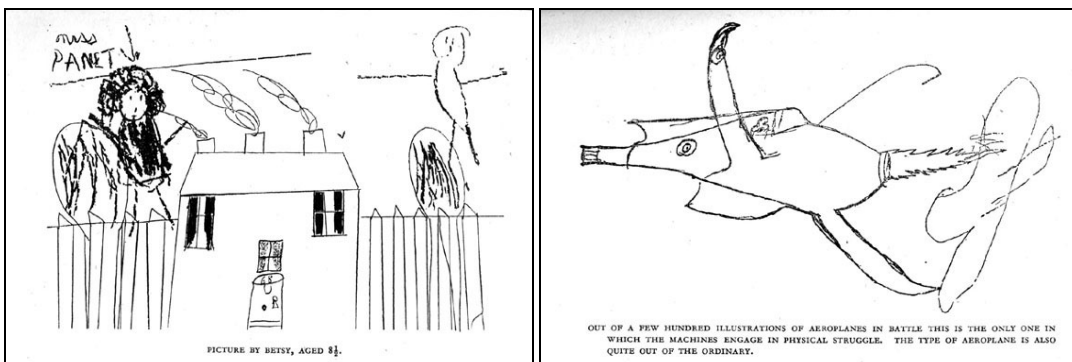


Figure 8: Children's drawings from *Branch Street*: the play centre and representation of war.

¹⁰ George Burden "The Junk Playground; an Educational Adjunct and an Antidote to Delinquency", *The Friend* no. 1029 (December 3, 1948)

Paneth was given the task of managing a play centre for ‘slum’ children who were too unruly to be evacuated, for which she gave an account in *Branch Street; a sociological study*, published in 1944. Her method of providing children with painting material, but no instructions or rules of conduct, which worked in other shelters, failed at Branch Street. This group smashed the toys, furniture and windows, stole from the staff, and sexually assaulted the female volunteers. Paneth figured that their aggression was rooted in traumatic childhood experiences brought about by overcrowding, poverty and punitive childrearing techniques, and was then transferred to the play centre volunteers. She took a ‘non-resistance line’ as a way of ‘winning’ the children over, by declining to take the position of their oppressors. Her staff was instructed to give them full license to work out their aggression until they become quote: ‘*sick of their own method*’, and could ‘*start life at the new place with rule and order*’. This strategy that promotes anarchy rather than enforcing discipline is based on the work of another Austrian, August Aichhorn. Following Freud, he argued that aggression is unconsciously aimed to provoke punishment, which then justifies the hate one feels to his parents, and by extension, to society. The refusal to punish or condemn frustrates the delinquent’s expectations and destabilizes his relation to authority. Aichhorn allowed his subjects ‘to work out their aggression’ to the point of *explosion*:

When this point came, the aggression changed its character. The outbreaks of rage against each other were no longer genuine, but were acted out for our benefit.¹¹

Aichhorn builds on the make-believe quality of play, its self-reflexivity, to purge his subjects of their aggression through play. Paneth allowed violence to rage without imposing limits, but rather than achieving catharsis, her group destroyed the play centre, and her staff quite. This failure brought about a change in the Paneth’s outlook. Once she began to work with the children on their own turf, their behavior changed and their aggression diminished. This development led Paneth to propose a new kind of play centre, in which children are provided with a bombed site, damaged like themselves, where they could build their own house with salvaged building materials. Paneth ends her proposal with the following statement:

We should also remember that the horde which Hitler employed to carry out his first acts of aggression—murdering and torturing peaceful citizens—was recruited mainly from desperate Branch Street youths, and that to help the individual means helping Democracy as well.¹²

Paneth, as well as the wartime press which extensively reviewed her book, framed juvenile delinquency in a wartime discourse on democratic citizenship that equates it with mental health. What is at stake is that Paneth seeks to constitute a democratic subject through the mechanism of identification: she provides her subjects with an object, a place with which they can identify with as

¹¹ August Aichhorn, *Wayward Youth* (London: Imago, 1951), 175. Originally published in 1925.

¹² Marie Paneth, *Branch Street; a Sociological Study* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1944), 120

a group, in order to prevent their identification with an authority figure, a dictator. In distinction with the libertarian position examined earlier, Paneth's work was about identification, not autonomy, and her use of anarchy was instrumental rather than ideological: that is, it is used as a technique for disarming the resistance of a marginal social group, in order to study and transform in from within.



Figure 9: Activity at the adventure playground, from Lambert's account: Self built and managed café. Building a fire.

After following these two theoretical lineages of the Junk Playground, I will now turn to the concrete dimension of dealing with everyday manifestations of violence, by drawing on the written account of Jack Lambert.¹³ Lambert states his dilemma in terms of how to negotiate the inclusive and non-authoritarian ethos of the Adventure Playground with the problem of dealing with rough kids who use force to dominate weaker children and destroy their creative work. Is it possible to control violence without enforcing authority? At first, Lambert expelled the lads from the playground, after moralizing and reasoning failed. The act of exclusion produced resistance and retaliation, expressed in the dramatic destruction of the playground, and it also kept out those who needed the playground most. In his second attempt, Lambert developed a technique for incorporating the 'lads' by insisting on addressing them as individuals, in order to break up the gang mentality that legitimized aggressive behavior, and positioned them as helpers, assigned responsibility for managing playground activity. Another technique was to adjust the playground to their interests, through the process of dialogue. Lambert provides an account of a rough group which he had to expel from the playground, since they disrupted and demoralized the play of the younger children. He followed them home and observed their intense interest in a broken scooter they were not able to fix. Together they opened a scooter club, in which the lads salvaged and fixed discarded scooters, which became the centre-piece of the playground. However, once they got a license and launched the scooters, the activity died out. This points to the limits of the junk playground from the bureaucratic point of view: its activities are un-repeatable and impermanent, since each individual case is allowed to achieve its own unique form, and then dissipate.

¹³ Jack Lambert, *Adventure Playground; a personal account of a play-leader's work as told to Jenny Pearson* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974)

To conclude this presentation, it is illuminating to compare the approach of the junk playground with contemporary notions of prevention through the design of the urban environment. Today the prevailing model follows Wilson and Kelling's "broken windows" theory from 1982, which conceptualized graffiti and vandalism as signs of disorder that instigate the process of moral and social breakdown. Fix the broken windows, the theory goes, remove signs of lack of control in the public realm, and disorderly behavior would be checked.¹⁴ This conservative strategy treats the act rather than the underlying causes, and stresses enforcement and surveillance as deterrence. If crime policy has returned full circle to the late nineteenth century's stress on the urban environment's demoralizing influence, and conceptualizes crime in terms of discipline, then the junk playground offers a timely critical alternative.

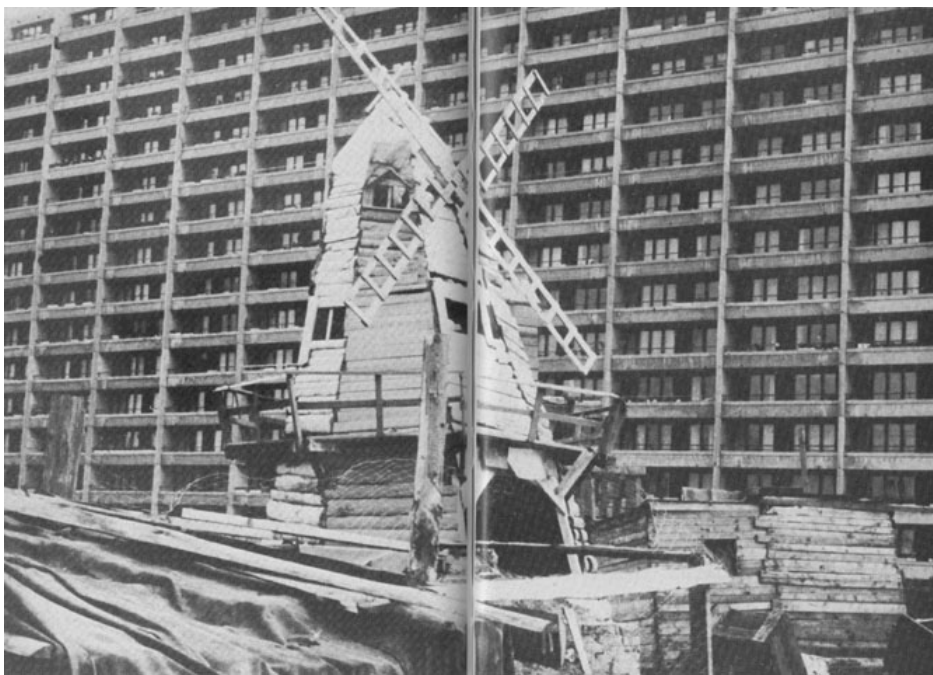


Figure 10: Beallerup Adventure Playground, Copenhagen.

Rather than merely providing a constructive 'outlet' to the child's supposedly inborn aggressiveness, it empowered children to become critics of the social order. By being the authors, interpreters, destroyers and rehabilitators of their living environments, they staged a sincere parody of urban renewal and consumer culture. As the junk yard pioneers conceptualized asocial behavior as a response to alienating environments over which the subject has no control, they advanced the idea that participatory and constructive play can re-establish a sense of belonging to a place and to a community, by constituting an active, engaged citizen that is empowered to take control of his environment, in a way that can be, or rather must be, pleasurable and fun.

¹⁴ Wilson & Killing, 'Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety', *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982.