

Not All Cardboard Boxes Are Created Equally: The role of  
self-constructed places in child development

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Children are the products of their environments. However, not all environments are created equally. Further, children are not simply clay whose purpose is to be passively molded by the environments around them. Instead, they are active agents with the power to define and assign meaning to their environments that matter most to them. In turn, these quintessential environments are empowered by the child to more strongly influence their development than their less meaningful counterparts. It is in this process of defining environments and assigning them meaning that children create places from spaces. Four pieces of plywood in a tree become a fort where independence is explored, a television screen becomes a partner in friendship and in play, and a collection of off white pages covered in colors and graphics becomes the comical inspiration for imagination - but only if the child chooses to see it as such. The power afforded to these meaning-filled places becomes the agentive catalyst to the development of the child.

### **On Meaning**

There is an abundant number of strategies children can use to assign meaning and develop places. Places can evolve as places of transition, reflection, inspiration, or solitude.

With only minimal familiarity, I started recognizing a single blinking yellow light at the top of the hill as the end of my commute to my life with my father. By the time I arrived, it was almost always dark and the small town's only traffic light served as a north star that guided us onto main street. As we rounded the turn from 1<sup>st</sup> avenue to main street, I was welcomed by a quiet street lined with glowing street lamps and relatively uniform storefronts that seem as though they were transplanted directly out of a Clint Eastwood

film. As we drove under the light, I started to realize that this was a different life for me and it was very unlikely that these two lives would ever overlap. I began cultivating each of these lives differently. My life with my mother and my life with my father became two constructed independent truths in my life and the blinking traffic light at the top of the hill was the threshold between the two. This exercise in maintaining two semi-constructed realities in the moment gave me a feeling of power and in the future would help me disguise my sexual orientation. (Belveal 2017)

To others, this ambiguous blinking light is simple a conveyor of traffic laws. However, as a young child I was able develop meaning in this traffic light. It became a transition for me. I traveled under this traffic light hundreds of times when I was a child and I began to see it as a place of meaning. The intersection over which the light hovered became the intersection of my two lives, and the turn onto Main Street signaled the moment I had transitioned into the next life. In a series of moments filled with agency, I chose to define this intersection and assign it meaning.

Children, often against or without the influence of adults, identify meaningful locations and cultivate meaning and relationships with them. For some, space may evolve into a place that provides a sanctuary from violence; for others, the very same space may evolve into a play sanctuary where the child begins exploring their independence and cultivating friendships. The meanings assigned to places are unique to each child. It could be argued that no two children can create the same place and therefore the developmental influence of those places, though significant to both children, must be considered differently.

After the assigning of meaning and the creation of place, the child will then hold higher regard for its role in the child's life. Because meaning is often assigned free from the direct control of adult agendas, the place becomes a unique construction of identity and self that is unavailable in the majority of the environments of childhood which are governed by the agendas of adults.

Therefore, the rarity and authentic nature of these places holds significance in their minds and is considered as a place of power in their developmental trajectory. In return, the child's future exposure to the place will be framed in its construction in the mind of the child and the developmental influence of the place will be magnified because the child has chosen to give it the power to do so. It is this development of and future interaction with a constellation of self-constructed places that supports the exploratory cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of the child.

### **On Time**

In addition to the physical nature of creating places, children are doing so in a temporal setting. The duration for which a child is exposed to the space, the stage in their own developmental trajectory, and the contextual history of the moment all have influence over the way that the place is constructed.

“The lights dimmed and Rafiki's voice bellowed a foreign chant through the concert hall, calling to the human-hybrid-animals that one by one showed themselves to the audience. One chanted from the balcony, two came down from the rafters, birds fluttered in from off stage. Finally, a parade of huge, life-like, exotic animals marched down the aisles of

the theater until they reached the stage and stood proudly at the base of Pride Rock” (Belveal 2013). My choir traveled to New York City to perform at Carnegie Hall but it was not the world renowned concert hall that held influential meaning for me, it was the cast on the stage at The New Amsterdam theatre that would change my life. As an eleven-year-old who had developed an intimate relationship with Disney, the larger than life production of The Lion King gave me the courage I needed to look beyond that blinking traffic light. Like Simba, I was riddled with a curiosity for what lies beyond the familiar. (Belveal 2017)

While this place was created in a brief moment, the confluence of times in this moment held significance. I was with this place for only a short period of time - approximately two hours. Had I spent less time or significantly more time in this constructed place, it is likely that the influence would have been different in meaning and in magnitude. Any less time, I may have lacked the opportunity to construct the place at all. Any more time, and I could have, for example, become enamored with the production which may have led to an exploration of the theater as opposed to an exploration of self. As a burgeoning adolescent craving independence, my stage in my developmental trajectory was crucial to the creation of this place. Because I had grown with the places of my past to seek exploration and independence, I was not silenced by fear on this trip which existed far beyond the boundaries of my comfort zone. Instead, the collection of my past developmental experiences with the places I had constructed led me to embrace the moment. Finally, traveling to New York by plane just a few years after the terrorist attack on September 11th, 2001 held much weight. I experienced heightened security and the moments were characterized by a national tenseness.

Even children with seemingly holistic agency are acting within (or against) the world in which they live. While there is, of course, no set scale that correlates duration with meaning (as any such scale would be reductionist of the experiences of children) the time spent with each space influences the subsequent creation of place. Further, the past places of their development have converged to create a developmental trajectory upon which their current standing holds influence in the creation of any current places. Finally, the time-bound world in which they operate is considered as they construct meaningful places. The children and young people in urban centers across West Africa are currently experiencing a wave of youth activism and uprising which in turn shifts the way that they construct a university campus into a place of mobilization (Strong 2016).

To one child, the cardboard box in which the family's new refrigerator was delivered may evolve into a shape shifting robot where the child is able to explore their passions for drawing and investigate risk as they use scissors and blades to construct and reconstruct their imaginations. To another child, the exact same box acts as a dark and silent sanctuary where they retreat to reflect on family conflicts. To yet another child, the massive 6-sided cardboard box may simply be a massive 6-sided cardboard box that belongs on the curb next to the green trash can. Depending on the developmental progress of the child, the duration spent with the box, the historical and cultural context of the moment, and the child's expressed interest the same box has the potential to be created as an innumerable set of places in the minds of different children. In response, the meaning assigned to the box and the place the child has created with it has varying potential to influence the child's developmental trajectory. The cardboard box becomes

something more than its restrictive materials when the user deems it as such. In the minds of an active and agentive child, it is clear then that not all cardboard boxes are created equally and not all environments have equal potential to influence the development of a child.

Reference:

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