

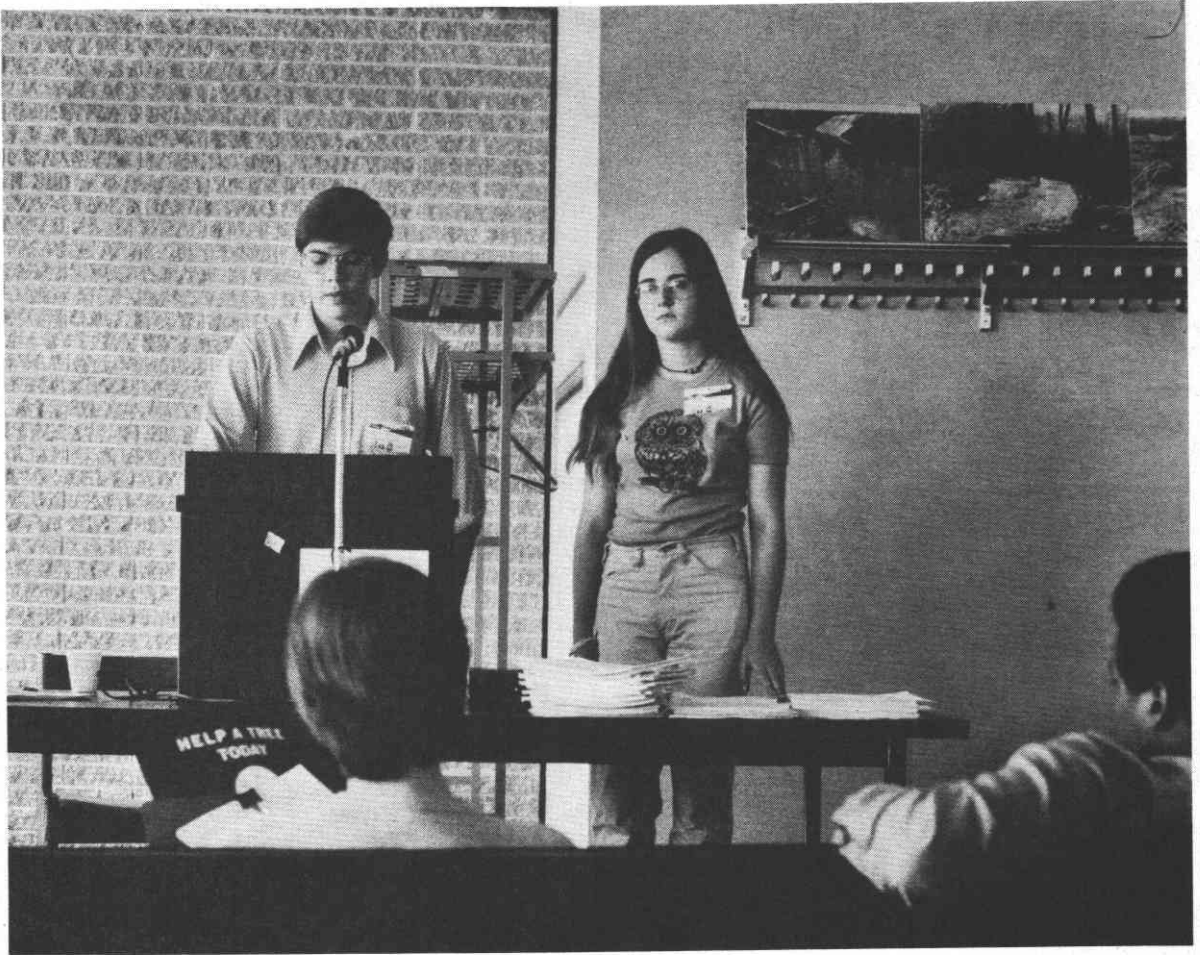


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"We should begin by learning from adolescents what they regard as adventurous activity. With their assistance, settings and projects might be developed in which some of their own proposals for legitimate adventure might be tried" - Florence C. Ladd

City Kids in the Absence of....

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ABSTRACT. Environmental requirements for adolescents are rarely met in urban settings. There are few opportunities and facilities for legitimate adventure. Public amenities and public places for private moments are inadequate. Programs and facilities that would enhance the "personhood" of the urban adolescent and increase the comfort and dignity adolescents experience in public places are needed.

LEGITIMATE ADVENTURE

I SPENT THE LATTER part of the 1960's engaged in a study of black adolescent boys, ranging in age from 12 to 17 years, who lived in the poorer sections of Boston's Roxbury and North Dorchester. They were the subjects of a study of identity formation in black youth. While others engaged in research focused on the impact of their families, school, and peers on their lives and their destinies, I explored what their neighborhoods and housing meant to them, where their Boston lay, and what they found in the Boston area to interest them, amuse them, depress them, excite them; what places they enjoyed, wanted to destroy, to cherish, to avoid. I soon realized that they found very few places that were interesting and safe to explore and enjoy, few places that offered them opportunities for challenging experiences and adventures that were *legitimate*.

What might they do for excitement, adventure? Steal a car and go for a ride at breakneck speed through Franklin Park or along Blue Hill Avenue. Do a little shoplifting in a downtown department store and *just* escape getting caught, getting busted. Rob the poor boxes of churches. Or grab a few pocketbooks after the first of the month, buy some grass or hash or heroin and get high. Pull a fire alarm or maybe even start a fire. Break into somebody's "pad" and "rip off" a radio or TV set which might be sold traded or simply discarded.

Such incidents are not exclusively in the domain of the black and the poor who are young. They touch the lives of our entire adolescent population. For some, they are the critical episodes that divert them from troublefree paths in directions that lead to more disruptive, trouble-making events. Still, the prospect of finding legitimate opportunities for adventure is a greater problem for poorer kids than for richer ones who, from time to time, have occasions for travel and vacations which afford them adventure through the stimulation of new settings, foreign languages, personal discovery, meeting people who are different, and so forth. Even for them, the opportunity to visit faraway places is only occasional; they, like their poorer peers, have routines and restrictions that limit the risks and the excitement they might enjoy.

Why do some kids choose to seek adventures that lead to trouble? Why don't they find fun in legitimate activities? Certainly some kids find stimulation and pleasure in museums, art galleries, and zoos. They play tennis, baseball, football, or soccer; go for a boat ride or a swim; discover new worlds in old libraries; take the elevator to the top of a skyscraper, and on a clear day are turned on by a panoramic view of their city and what lies beyond. Don't such activities afford kids experience that is sufficiently exciting and adventurous?

What is exciting and adventurous in the realm of adolescent experience in the 70s? To experience adventure, some kids, particularly in

urban settings, must test the legal and moral boundaries of society and, in the eyes of some break the law. Situations that allow them opportunities for risk-taking and exploration often are situations in which they are violating a law or the rights of property of other people, or both. An element of adventure lies, in part, in the knowledge that one is challenging or violating the legal and moral structure of his society. In urban settings, it is as if kids are forced or compelled to find adventure and excitement in activities that involve legal and moral risks. During the years when boys and girls need external challenges against which they can test their own daring and endurance, there are few legitimate opportunities available to them in their daily routines and environments for them to test themselves. There are few legitimate adventurous situations that allow them to explore the range of their physical and intellectual skills and abilities.

When we consider where young people of previous generations in the United States sought and found adventure, our thoughts turn to natural settings, wildlife, and open spaces. Vanishing are the natural areas, especially the wooded areas, in and around cities where, only a few decades ago, kids explored, charted, roamed, hid, were lost, and (the lucky ones) found safe and unhurt. Dirt roads on the edge of the city that once seemingly lead nowhere are now paved and lead into the orderly geometry of suburban developments. The pockets of wilderness, those undeveloped areas that once were found near what clearly were the city limits, have been leveled and covered with residential developments or industrial parks. There are few natural environments left where the urban adolescent may explore and experience adventure in.

There are parks, with much that is natural, of course. Most urban parks in the U.S., especially those with wooded areas where some kids might experience adventure, are regarded as unsafe. Adolescents are apprehensive about being mugged or maimed in city parks. To be sure, adolescents are users of parks. Going to a park and running the risk of being robbed or assaulted involves an element of adventure. For those who go innocently into a park, the element of adventure is incalculable; the odds may well be against them. They are not comparable to the calculable risks presented by trails through

woods or the face of a mountain or a river's rapids.

Except for the courts and playing fields for sports, playgrounds include few facilities that attract adolescents. There are a few playgrounds in the U.S. that offer adolescents the possibility of invention and the opportunity for supervising younger kids, but relatively few adolescents are to be found on those playgrounds; their clientele are largely preadolescent.

There are city-based programs such as scouting that generate adventures with the urban context. Scouting and other similar programs, such as Outward Bound and the Youth Conservation Corps, have provided wilderness experience or at least camping opportunities and environmental education for the few urban youngsters who have had a chance to participate in them. For many reasons, such programs are available and attractive to only a few. First of all, the programs are limited and they are not highly visible. They are, generally speaking, expensive to operate, and consequently, prohibitively expensive for kids from low-income families. The style of adult supervision renders the programs unappealing to some kids, who resent or resist adult authority figures. Such programs, however, have brought legitimate adventure into the lives of a few city kids.

How might the positive features of programs with adventure elements be developed as models for new situations which might appeal to a larger number of urban adolescents? What would city kids like to do to experience legitimate adventure? Under whose auspices should adventure programs be developed? (If there are "sponsors" and "programs" would the events have the quality of adventure at all?) To what extent should schools be responsible for encouraging the direct participation of students in adventurous experiences? How might features of urban environments be designed or transformed to provide settings for adventures? Can wilderness within cities be simulated and maintained for safe use by kids?

We should begin by learning from adolescents what they regard as adventurous activity. With their assistance, settings and projects might be developed in which some of their own proposals for legitimate adventure might be tried. In a city, the adventurous aspects of the work of the

fire department, city hospitals, newsgathering agencies and the police department might be made more visible to adolescents. Museums might organize clubs for would-be explorers who, through film and other media, might experience the thrills other explorers have sought and found. Scouting could be revitalized and expanded to offer more kids opportunities for the physical and intellectual tests they need. The collaboration of schools and private organizations such as the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Sierra Club, and other conservationist groups might broaden opportunities for adventure for some adolescents.

From a design viewpoint, the possibility of simulating wilderness or creating within cities environments with risk-presenting elements could be a challenge to the planner and landscape architect to go beyond the conventional playground and design places with adventurous possibilities for adolescents.

Finally, adults might reflect on what they do to experience adventure. Of course the needs of adults for adventurous experiences are quite different from those of adolescents. Nonetheless, it seems that a large segment of the adult population in the U.S. are passive, vicarious adventurers. Through the mass media, news of the adventures of others comes to us swiftly and in vivid detail. The small band of active adult adventurers who challenge time, space, mountains, seas, climatic conditions, and world records are far outnumbered by the spectators who sit at home and watch the action on television. To improve the quality and increase the number of adventure opportunities for young people in a society, we must reexamine what adventure means to its adults, its standard makers. Consider what *you*, as an adult, do for adventure and what a 14-year-old city girl or boy may do. Then consider with her or him, with teachers, parents, mayors, recreation directors, scout leaders, coaches, active adventurers, architects, and planners what legitimate adventures might be generated for city kids.

PUBLIC AMENITIES

A means of communicating to an individual that he is a nonperson, that is, someone whose existence does not matter, or that he is less than human in some respects, is to deprive him of some basic amenities that others, more privileg-

ed, have available to them for their routine use. In public places, the absence or denial of the use of such simple amenities as places to sit, drinking fountains, and toilet facilities, is a very effective way of depriving people of their personhood, and, indirectly, a means of controlling their behavior. Until the civil rights movement of the late 50s and early 60s brought change to policies governing public facilities, blacks in the U.S., particularly in Southern States, were denied access to certain public amenities as an expression of the denial of their personhood. Other groups in history, of course, have been treated similarly in sociopolitical contexts in which they have been regarded as the outcasts or the enemy.

In contemporary American society, we now see adolescents being treated that way. Many public places that serve a predominantly adolescent clientele do not provide the simple comforts such places typical provide (or used to provide) for adults. For example, playgrounds and playing fields are developed with no toilet facilities for the young users. Restaurants (if they really can be called restaurants) that cater to adolescents frequently provide only food and formica counters; napkins, catsup, mustard, and flatware must be requested by the consumer. In recently built eating facilities, seating may not have been included in the plan; older facilities may have been stripped of their seats.

There are more extreme examples of statements by designers and managers of public places that say to young people that they are not wanted. Their money will be accepted, but they themselves are unacceptable. In and around drugstores, grocery stores, ice cream shops, and variety stores that are frequented by young people (often situated near other facilities used by them primarily, such as schools, cinemas, skating rinks, etc.) there are signs and signals that ask them not to linger. There are "authorities" who are present to make them feel uncomfortable, to let them know that they are not wanted. "No loitering", some places say figuratively as well as literally. "Move along", policemen order a line of young people leaning against a store front on a major urban thoroughfare.

The posture of adolescents in public places often is a leaning one. Kids may be seen leading against a store front, leaning against parked cars, leaning because there is no place to sit. In

the U.S., we live in a "cafe-less society". The public or semipublic chairs and tables that afford a dignified vantage point for those who wish to linger along the boulevards and plazas of European cities and towns are not available on a large (or economically accessible) scale for the use of those who would enjoy the living theater an active street scene offers. Such places need not be exclusively for adolescents; they could be inviting to all ages as are Europe's most successful cafes.

In facilities expressly for adolescents, such as schools, amenities that would enhance the comfort and dignity of students should have highest priority. Student lounges in public high schools are often an afterthought. A classroom or corner of a corridor is belatedly converted into a "lounge" by furnishing it with a sign, "Student Lounge". Elsewhere, in and around junior high and high schools, there is ample space for milling around but there are a few places to sit except in the classroom. There are rarely benches in or around the open space and playgrounds adjacent to public schools. When students use the steps or walls of the schools for seating, they often are asked by teachers, custodians, or the principal to move, to sit elsewhere - as if there were somewhere else to sit! And so they mill around again like a discontented herd.

Inside schools, there is a good deal of milling around, too. There are expanses of ill-defined space (and time, when there is little or nothing to do) where youngsters linger while they wait for class to begin or wait to see a teacher or wait during recess or simply wait.

The arguments against providing attractive settings for young people are well known: they will misuse them, abuse them, vandalize them, deface them with graffiti. In truth, adolescents have rarely been offered attractive settings expressly for their use. They are rarely offered amenities that speak to their personhood and invite their participation in adult social forms and behaviors.

A change in cultural attitude toward adolescents may be required before we get around to improving facilities intended for adolescent users. That need not be the order of events, however, Environmental changes are simpler to implement than are attitudinal changes. Designing public environments for adolescents (and other age groups as well) with amenities that are addressed to their needs and

to their personhood might be a step toward eliciting from them more socially acceptable public behavior, and, at the same time, encouraging their adult critics to view them differently; indeed, those critics might be encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate the personhood of adolescence. Providing tables and benches along the perimeters of school yards and playing fields, small amphitheaters in parks for impromptu bongo or guitar recitals, benches along streets or at intersections where there is action to observe, adequate public toilet facilities, and comfortable student lounges in public schools are just a few environmental changes that might enhance the public lives of adolescents and increase their status on the streets of cities and towns.

PLACES FOR INTIMACY

Adolescent boys and girls require times and places where they can enjoy each other's company in small groups or simply experience being alone. Those intimate moments, those private times, are rather special. The experience of these unique and important events is enhanced when they occur in unusual settings or in settings with special effects. What adolescents need for intimate occasions is probably very similar to what adults require for their intimate or private moments. Examine the types of settings an adult selects for an intimate meeting with a friend, a relative, a spouse—a secluded bench in the park, a grassy grove near a river bank, a corner table in a dimly lit restaurant with unobtrusive music or conversation, a booth in a bar that has a certain appeal. There are, no doubt, secluded park benches to which some adolescents retreat for some of their private moments. However, safe secluded spots in natural urban environments are harder and harder to find. Built environments that adolescents use rarely convey a feeling of privacy or seclusion. There are few settings in which they can enjoy a confidential chat or begin to explore the avenues to intimacy.

To be sure, for several decades the automobile as living room has served kids (and others) in the U.S. as a place for private experiences. The automobile as a place to sit and converse, eat, and drink is less than satisfactory, especially if the occasion is prolonged. The automobile as a setting for social occasions is pervasive in

adolescent culture in the U.S. It is not only poor and working class kids who may be found socializing in cars on Friday and Saturday nights; a tour of shopping centers or parking lots in the affluent suburbs after the stores have closed will reveal a number of parked cars occupied by kids listening to car radios or taped music while they talk, smoke, and drink beer. The automobile is a less than adequate environment for such occasions.

Kids ought to have more environmental and social options, more satisfactory settings for their special occasions. They ought to be able to

experience some of their special moments in places that enhance their dignity and delight. In planning facilities for adolescent users, their needs for places for intimacy and privacy should be taken into account. At the same time, the values, standards, and expectations of society must be taken into account, too. Reconciling these different needs is not easy; reports and suggestions from many quarters are needed to determine how far the culture is ready to move toward improving this aspect of the lives of its less privileged adolescents.