

Playtime

'It's become increasingly hard to be playful.'

Richard Dattner, landscape architect,

commenting on how "something is lost" with new designs in playground equipment.

There was a time in the not-too-distant past when any urban area that looked faceless or neglected to an adult would, almost inevitably, have deep, 'spirit of place' meanings in children's street culture.

Elias Canetti tells us of the intensity of his engagement with the city of his early boyhood when he writes – "Everything I experienced later in life had already happened in Ruse." He was commenting on the richness and variety of a childhood experience that undoubtedly shaped the adult he became.

Canetti expresses wonderment in response to phenomena that a contemporary child may find 'boring'. A youngster who explores the world using a computer search engine is likely to be indifferent towards the sensory landscape that surrounds him. Here's what the environmentalist Richard Louv has to say about boredom –

"In medieval times, if someone displayed the symptoms we now identify as boredom, that person was thought to be committing something called *acedia*, a 'dangerous form of spiritual alienation' - a devaluing of the world and its creator."

Most experts now agree that, even at an early age, children know the difference between fact and fantasy. Those who only play with 'educational' toys tend to remain in the factual domain. However, children need to fantasize. Nature (and a cityscape is part of nature) provides near infinite opportunity to do so. A growing body of research shows that full-on contact with nature nurtures creativity and can actually enhance educational performance.

Equilibrium has designed a sensory garden for the seven young occupants of our small group home known locally as the Pink House. Through careful and imaginative design it is possible to create landscapes that offer a wide range of sensory experiences to people with disabilities within a relatively small area. Sensory gardens don't really require expensive, specially designed components – the beauty is in the arrangement and employment of multi-purpose components to pack a whole load of what Mother Nature tends to leave scattered round into a small and manageable area.

Nowadays, youth culture is a product of the all-pervasive media – it is something that youngsters consume as opposed to conjuring it out of their own imaginations.

As the Coca Cola-Puff Daddy-Harry Potter colonization of children's territory continues apace, our growing concern for the welfare of our offspring, our hyper-vigilance and increasingly irrational distrust of the communities in which we live are



depriving us of haunted houses, dens and hide-outs, kissing posts and chalk hieroglyphs on pavements.

Mallory climbed Everest because “it was there”. A child will climb a tree because it is there unless, of course, he is zealously reminded of the potential consequences of his adventure – accidental injury (of which there is an outside chance) or a reprimand from one of the growing army of monitors, supervisors and killjoys (of which there is every chance).

We are very grateful to the talented British artist Emma Metcalfe who has provided permission to use her artwork in the context of one EQ event. Emma describes a tree as ‘nature’s climbing frame’. Well said, Emma.

Ladies and gentlemen - it’s playtime!

