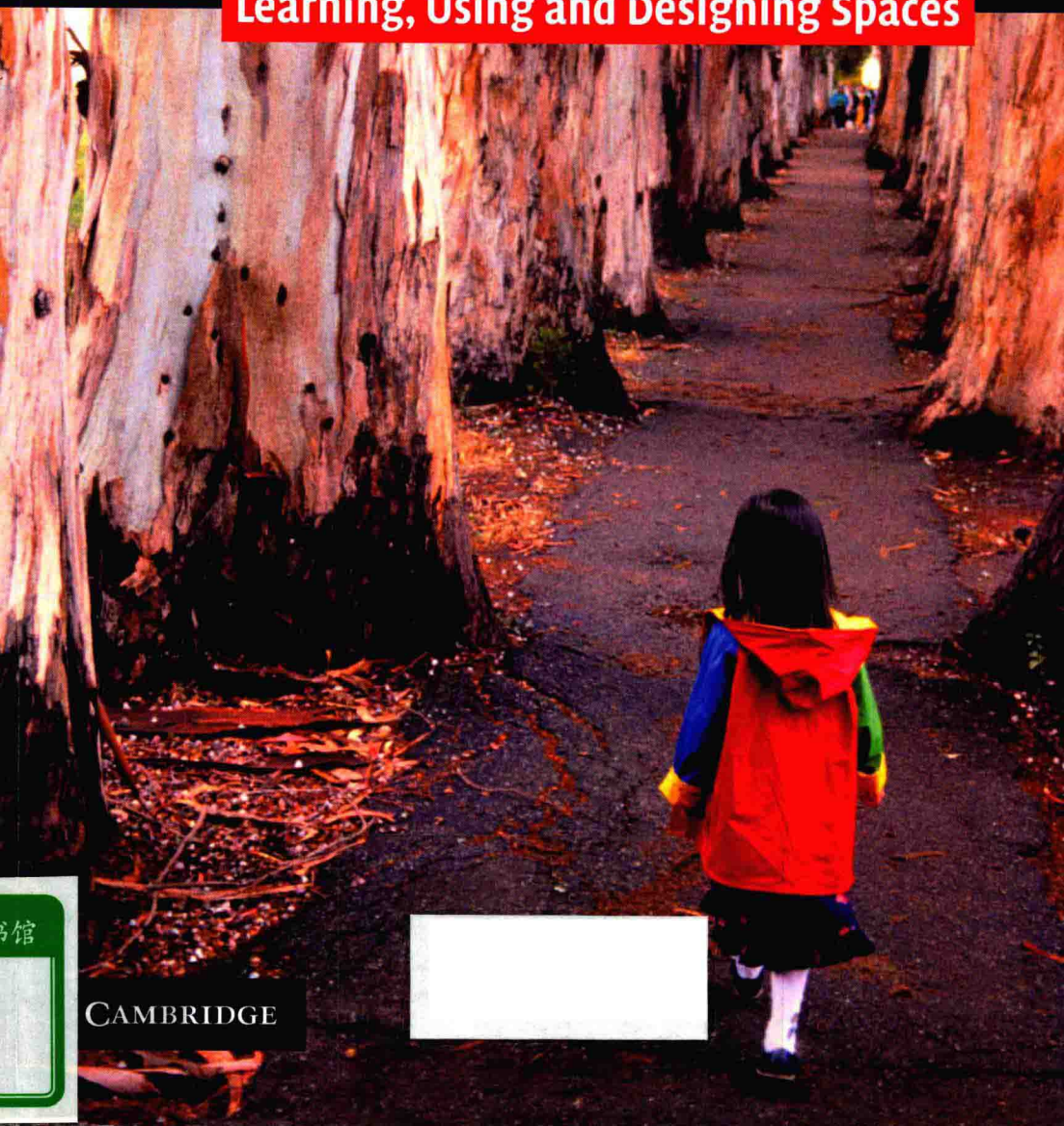


Edited by Christopher Spencer and Mark Blades

CHILDREN AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

Learning, Using and Designing Spaces



CAMBRIDGE

Children and their Environments

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Christopher Spencer and Mark Blades

University of Sheffield



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Children and their Environments

This fascinating book examines theories of children's perceptions of space and place and explores how these theories are applied to the world of children. The focus is on children in large real world spaces; 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. An international team of authors compare the experiences of children from different cultures and backgrounds. Often excluded from discussions of place-design on the presumption of lack of awareness, young children have many environmental competencies which should lead to their inclusion. They can read maps and study photographs, respond to the natural and man-made world with great sensitivity, and contribute considerably to the community. This book will appeal to environmental and developmental psychologists and geographers, and also to planners by linking research on children's understandings and on their daily lives to recommendations for practice.

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MARK BLADES is a senior lecturer in developmental psychology at the University of Sheffield, UK. He has degrees from the Universities of Cambridge and Sheffield, and a PhD in developmental psychology (Sheffield). His research has considered several aspects of children's environmental cognition, including their way-finding abilities; their understanding of environmental representations; and the mobility

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An introduction

Christopher Spencer and Mark Blades

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 Kytä), 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, Evanthia Lyons and Alison Bouchier-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 Kyttä).

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,



Figure 0.1. The affordances and challenges of the built environment: a place for children?

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