

Landscape of the Child in Post-War Britain

This project responds to recent anxieties about the well-being of the British children. Most notably, a recent UNICEF report placed British children near the bottom of a league of leading economic nations. The one category where Britain performed better was in levels of safety. But here too, there has been increasing concern that over-anxious parents and adults provide security at the expense of a necessary freedom for healthy mental and physical development. In particular, the lack of independent mobility experienced by many British children (and instead the tendency to being tied to the home and the computer) is now increasingly regarded as something with potentially detrimental effects for both physical and mental well-being.

The project examines the landscape of the British child from the Second World War up to the 1970s. In particular, it looks at the relationship between three sites: the institution, the home, and the outside world (particularly, the physical landscape of the city and the street; but also a virtual landscape, most notably that provided by television). It argues that the Second World War was important in undermining the status of the institution as a good landscape for child development, and in elevating the importance of the good family home. It also suggests that a third space, that of the street and of independence of the child to explore the city, was closed down in this period, in part as a result of the anxieties about security emerging from the War. And it looks at the creation of special spaces – the adventure playground, and children’s television – that emerged to provide a landscape designed with the psychological and physical needs of children in mind. In tracing the contraction of the landscape of the child, the project currently examines anxieties about two dangers in the post-war decades: first, that associated with traffic and road accidents; second, that associated with a fear of sexual assault.

If the different spaces of institution, home, and the outside world provide a first route into thinking about the landscape of the child, the second is to differentiate between: first, the child as a figure in the landscape (the social history of where children spent their time and where they could move); secondly, efforts to create a landscape for the child (a history of social policy and of ambition as well as practical achievement); and finally an increasing appreciation that the child saw the landscape differently to the adult, and as such that there was a unique landscape of the child. In this post-war period, efforts to create a landscape for the child would be deeply influenced by this recognition, and by the psychological thought that lay behind it.