

City Play

Amanda Dargan & Steven Zeitlin

This essay is adapted from the authors' recent book City Play. Copyright © 1990 by Rutgers, The State University. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press.

When John Jacob Rascob and his partners transformed the New York skyline by erecting the Empire State Building, they probably never considered that beneath the tower's express elevators the old Sunfish Creek had once formed a natural swimming hole; nor did they imagine that, across the East River in Queens, children would use the switching on of the building's lights to tell the time for coming in from play. Indeed, the architects of American cities did not design stoops for ballgames or sidewalks for jumping rope, and no one considered the hazard to kites when they put up telephone wires. Yet as a result of countless design decisions like these, a young person's experience of New York gradually changed — as streets were paved, buildings grew upward, cars pushed children from the streets, rowhouses filled once vacant lots, and the increasing density led to rooftop games and cellar clubs.

We begin with the idea that we can understand a place — in this case New York City — by exploring the traditional activities that give it meaning. These highly localized and repeated activities shape our experience of the city. Through play, harsh and imposing city objects often made of metal and concrete are imbued

with human values, associations, and memories. Play is one of the ways we develop a sense of neighborhood in a large city. Play is one of the ways a city street becomes “our block.”

Barging out of doors with play on their minds, city children confront stoops, hydrants, telephone poles, lampposts, cars, brick walls, concrete sidewalks, and asphalt streets. Children leaping from the doorways as He-Man and Sheera, or Captain Blood, Superman, or the Knights of the Round Table, have at their disposal an array of swords and shields, which to the uninitiated more closely resemble dented garbage can lids and discarded umbrellas. For the would-be circus performer or ballet dancer, the stoop provides the perfect stage. Those with ball in hand have manhole covers, cars, hydrants, and lampposts to define a playing field. Jumping off ledges, using discarded mattresses and box springs as trampolines, or riding bikes up ramps made from scrap wood, they enjoy the dizzying thrills of vertigo. Each kind of play — vertigo, mimicry, chance, physical skill, and strategy — has its own city settings and variants.

In the crowded, paved-over city, urban dwellers joyfully locate play by incorporating features of the urban landscape into their games; they transform the detritus of urban life into homemade playthings and costumes; and they exert control over their environment, creating and passionately defending private spaces.

In his essay “Fun in Games,” Erving Goffman speaks of play as “focused interaction,” in which rules of playful transformation tell players how the real world will be modified inside the encounter. With the outside world held at bay, players create a new world within. A kind of membrane forms around them. They often experience a sense of intimacy, the closeness of sharing a world apart.

Certain kinds of action outside the game such as an ambulance going by or a building

Amanda Dargan is the director of the Folk Arts Program at the Queens Council on the Arts in New York. She is the author of several books and articles on family folklore and children's play traditions.

Steven Zeitlin is the director and co-founder of City Lore, an organization dedicated to the preservation of New York City's living cultural heritage. He is the co-author of a number of books on American folk culture including A Celebration of American Family Folklore.



Girls perform "cheers" at the Marcy Projects in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. *Photo by Steven Zeitlin, courtesy Queens Council on the Arts*

manager yelling out the window can cause the play scene to "flood out," bursting the membrane. When we think of playing fields, we think perhaps of diamonds, gridirons, courts, and playgrounds, but a playing field can in fact be anywhere. It is more akin to an energy field that repels forces outside its domain of interest and envelops the players with a force as powerful as their concentration.

Within play worlds, time has its own measures: "We played until it got too dark to see," many people told us. Children play while the last reflection of twilight in the sky still dimly silhouettes a flying ball; they will play while hunger is still possible to ignore. "The heat of day, the chill of rain, even the pangs of hunger," writes Barbara Biber, "are not sufficient to intrude on the absorption of a child at play." Play time is measured not according to minutes and hours but according to the rules and structures of play; time often goes by in a "split second," metered by the turning of a rope or the rhythm of a rhyme: "Doctor, doctor will I die? / Yes, my child, and so will I. / How many moments will I live? / One, two, three, four . . ."

In play, rules and boundaries are defined by the players themselves. This is first base — and so it is. This sidewalk square is jail, this broken antenna is a ray gun — and through the magic of play, they are. Transformation is the process of recasting the rules, the boundaries, the images, the characters of the real world within the boundaries of play. This is at the heart of play: taking a space or an object and devising a new use for it, thereby making it one's own.

As they transform the city for play, children manifest a remarkable imagination. A playful

order prevails. Hydrants, curbs, and cornices of the city become a gameboard. The castoffs of city living — bottle caps, broomsticks, and tin cans — become playing pieces. "The older kids," writes Sam Levenson, "taught the younger ones the arts and crafts of the street." Growing up in an East Harlem tenement, he recalls how

ashcan covers were converted into Roman shields, oatmeal boxes into telephones, combs covered with tissue paper into kazoos . . . a chicken gullet into Robin Hood's horn, candlesticks into trumpets, orange crates into store counters, peanuts into earrings, hatboxes into drums, clothespins into pistols, and lumps of sugar into dice.

Street toys are not "found objects"; they are searched for. A great deal of effort often goes into locating and shaping precisely the right object for play. In Bedford-Stuyvesant, for instance, prized caps for the sidewalk game of skelly were fashioned by filing a Moosehead Ale bottleneck on the curb to produce a glass ring smooth enough to glide along concrete. In Astoria, the best skelly pieces were the plastic caps on the feet of school desks.

Neighborhoods provide different raw materials. In Chinatown, mothers who work in the garment industry provide sought-after items. Jacks are often made from buttons — each "button jack" consisting of a set of five or six buttons sewn together. Children use rubberbands hooked together to create a "Chinese jump rope." The elastic is stretched between the feet of two girls while a third does cat's cradle-like



A boy plays with stilts in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York. Photo by Martha Cooper, City Lore

stunts with her legs. Sometimes, the ropes are fashioned from white elastic bands which mothers bring home from the factories.

"Play," writes Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "is an arena of choice in many contexts where life options are limited." In a crowded city with its contested arenas, the freedom to play is hardly regarded as a basic human right. In some parts of the city where space is uncontested, a child can mark the boundaries of a play space with a piece of chalk, and nothing more is needed; children can "frame" their play space with boundaries based on mutual agreement. More often, however, the task of establishing play spaces takes on a different character as young and old battle for autonomy and control. Perhaps the toughness sometimes perceived in city children may come from the human battles they fight to earn and maintain the right to playfully transform some autonomous space in the city. Through it all, children strive to gain control over their play worlds. As Alissa Duffy chanted as she and a friend jumped up and down on a dis-

carded refrigerator box, "We're just kids! I am five and he is three and we rule everything!"

The scholarly interest in children's folklore in the United States dates from the work of William Wells Newell, who helped to found the American Folklore Society in 1888. Like many of the scholars who documented children's games after him, Newell was primarily interested in traditional games and rhymes which had survived across generations of children. Collecting from both adults and children in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, Newell believed that the "quaint" rhymes of children were "survivals" and "relics" of ancient song and poetry.

Contemporary folklorists believe that children's rhymes and games are more interesting because of the way they comment on the present rather than the past. Nonetheless, through a century of collecting, scholars have emphasized traditional rhymes and games, transmitted through the generations in fixed phrases. The rhymes and games gathered in these works echo one another, and their texts affirm the conservatism of children, who pass on rhymes with small variations from one generation to the next. In New York, some of the rhymes have a distinctive urban flavor:

I won't go to Macy's any more,
more, more.
There's a big fat policeman at the door,
door, door.
He'll grab you by the collar and make
you pay a dollar.
I won't go to Macy's any more,
more, more.

I should worry, I should care,
I should marry a millionaire.
He should die, I should cry,
I should marry another guy.

Flat to rent, inquire within,
A lady got put out for drinking gin.
If she promises to drink no more
Here's the key to _____'s front door.

But though scholars and laypeople have a longstanding interest in the conservatism of traditional rhymes and games, improvisation has always played a major role in children's play. Bess Lomax Hawes writes about the "apparently paradoxical co-existence of rules and innovation within play." She observed children playing a game whose object was to step on all the sidewalk



A boy plays skelly in the neighborhood of Sunnyside in Queens, New York. Photo by Steven Zeitlin, courtesy Queens Council on the Arts

cracks, an exact inversion of another popular neighborhood game, “step on a crack, break your mother’s back.” She suggests that “only those cultural items which are susceptible to variation have much chance of survival.” Yet, though scholars have noted the improvisatory quality in children’s lore, this kind of play has rarely been thoroughly documented, nor has it received the kind of attention paid to traditional children’s games.

Our work emphasizes the improvisatory side of children’s lore; children may be jumping to the same rhymes, and playing the same games, but they are improvising with the materials, negotiating the rules, and imaginatively fitting them into various city spaces. After all, before a game can be played, the players must agree upon the rules; and in the city, figuring out the rules — deciding just how an abstract set of regulations will apply to this space at this moment — is as important as the game itself. Traditional games and rhymes are testaments to the conservatism of children; but the ways the games are actually played at any given moment, the ways they are adapted to particular urban settings, and the ways they are improvised upon reveals a creativity that is no less important to the legacy.

“Play as a medium of adventure infuses all aspects of city life,” notes Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

As ‘poets of their own acts,’ players in the city occupy space temporarily: they seize the moment to play as the opportunity arises, inserting the game into the interstices of the city’s grid and schedule. . . . While lacking the kinds of insti-

tutions and spaces controlled by the powers that be, players transform the mundane into an adventure by means of a rope, a ball, a dance or a haircut in spaces occupied for the moment. Those adventures lead in many directions. . . .

Further Readings

- Bronner, Simon J. 1988. *American Children’s Folklore*. Little Rock, Arkansas: August House.
- Dargan, Amanda, and Steven Zeitlin. 1990. *City Play*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Hale, Ethel, and Oliver Hale. 1938. “From Sidewalk, Gutter and Stoop: Being a Chronicle of Children’s Play and Game Activity.” Manuscript, 2 packages, New York Public Library.
- Hawes, Bess Lomax, and Bessie Jones. 1972. *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1983. The Future of Folklore Studies in America: The Urban Frontier. *Folklore Forum* 16: 175-233.
- Mergen, Bernard. 1982. *Play and Playthings: A Reference Guide*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Nasaw, David. 1985. *Children of the City: At Work and at Play, 1900-1920*. New York: Doubleday.
- Opie, Iona, and Peter Opie. 1969. *Children’s Games in Street and Playground*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.