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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE ARLINGTON HUTS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents a case study of a spontaneous children's hut-building process that flourished in a school ground for about 40 years and ceased in 1981. The issues considered include types of hut, settings, social processes, gender and changes over time. The paper also documents the demise of spontaneous hut-building and its replacement with formal huts when the process came into conflict with adult goals.

Between the ages of about four and twelve years, children have a widespread tendency to create places for themselves out of whatever opportunities their environment affords. The form may be a blanket over a table, a corner under the stairs, a hollow in the bushes or a tree house. It may be called a "fort," a "hut," a "cubby" or just "my place," but the evidence of such a place-making process and its importance for children of this age abounds (Cobb, 1959; Cooper, 1970; Hart, 1979; Nicholson, 1971; Moore, 1986). This is the story of such a process that developed to become a tradition in one primary school, a process that continued for about 40 years and then ceased in 1981.

The place is called Arlington and it is the junior part of a private school called Preshil in Melbourne, Australia. The school is an ongoing and very successful experiment in progressive education which has occupied the same site continuously since 1938. Arlington was originally a house on a large suburban block of land, school buildings have been added piecemeal over the years in a manner that I have described elsewhere (Dovey, 1984). The school's philosophy, drawing from the ideas of writers such as Froebel and Dewey, recognized the importance of play in child development and sought an integration of learning with everyday life. In terms of the physical environment this resulted in a lack of distinction between "classroom" and "playground" and a strong integration between inside and outside activities.

From the earliest days, hut building was an integral part of everyday life at Arlington. It was considered a natural extension of formal educational activity and of the task-based educational philosophy of the school. It was, however, not a programmed activity but a spontaneous one, not something that was very organized but rather something that was not stopped. It was also an extension into the school grounds of the kinds of activities that were occurring spontaneously in the wider urban environment when opportunities were present. The opportunities were

present at Arlington in the form of available space, a marvellous collection of climbable peppercorn trees and a social and educational context that valued the spontaneous creativity of children.

The early history of the huts remains incomplete, but it is clear that they proliferated from the earliest days of the school, both at ground level and in the trees. I have pieced together the story from old photographs and archives, interviews with ex-students and teachers, and from observations of and interviews with the children building huts in 1980. The general layout of the Arlington landscape and its hut building territories in 1980 are shown in Figure 1. At that time there were about 40 huts and the evidence suggests that that number remained constant for 40 years. If the processes of appropriation, demolition and renovation were similar over that time—as it appears they were—then Arlington has been the site of at least 3000 huts.

Types of huts

There have been a variety of different types of huts emerging from different age groups and genders, and from different spatial and political contexts at Arlington. In a sense the process began inside the classroom where small places under tables were appropriated or created with cloth and cardboard boxes. The spontaneous creation of outside places first emerged amongst the five-year-olds. Here the "hut" could be anything from an existing nook appropriated without any transformation to more constructed forms such as boards propped against a fence or tree (Figure 2). Imagination played a key role in the experience of the huts at this age. For example, one "hut" I was shown was under a three foot high platform with some posts for support. The only sign of habitation was a wooden block seat. In the occupant's eyes, however, there were walls, windows and doors. The framework showed many generations of nailholes, relics of previous dreams made manifest. Another "hut" was no more than a cavity in some undergrowth together with the proclamation "this is ours!". Another cavity nearby had some boards on the ground and sticks woven into the surrounding bushes as a symbolic boundary. Among children of this age, the huts tended to be appropriated by individuals or couples. The five-year-olds had their own section of the grounds, protected from the "biggies" with whom they did not have to compete for territory. One former student remembers at this age:

"...watching the 'big kids' who had real hammers and nails and huge timber packing cases and trees and ropes and ladders with which to create buildings of almost incredible splendor."

The "biggies" hut building territory extended throughout the rear play area of the school. It was the site for three

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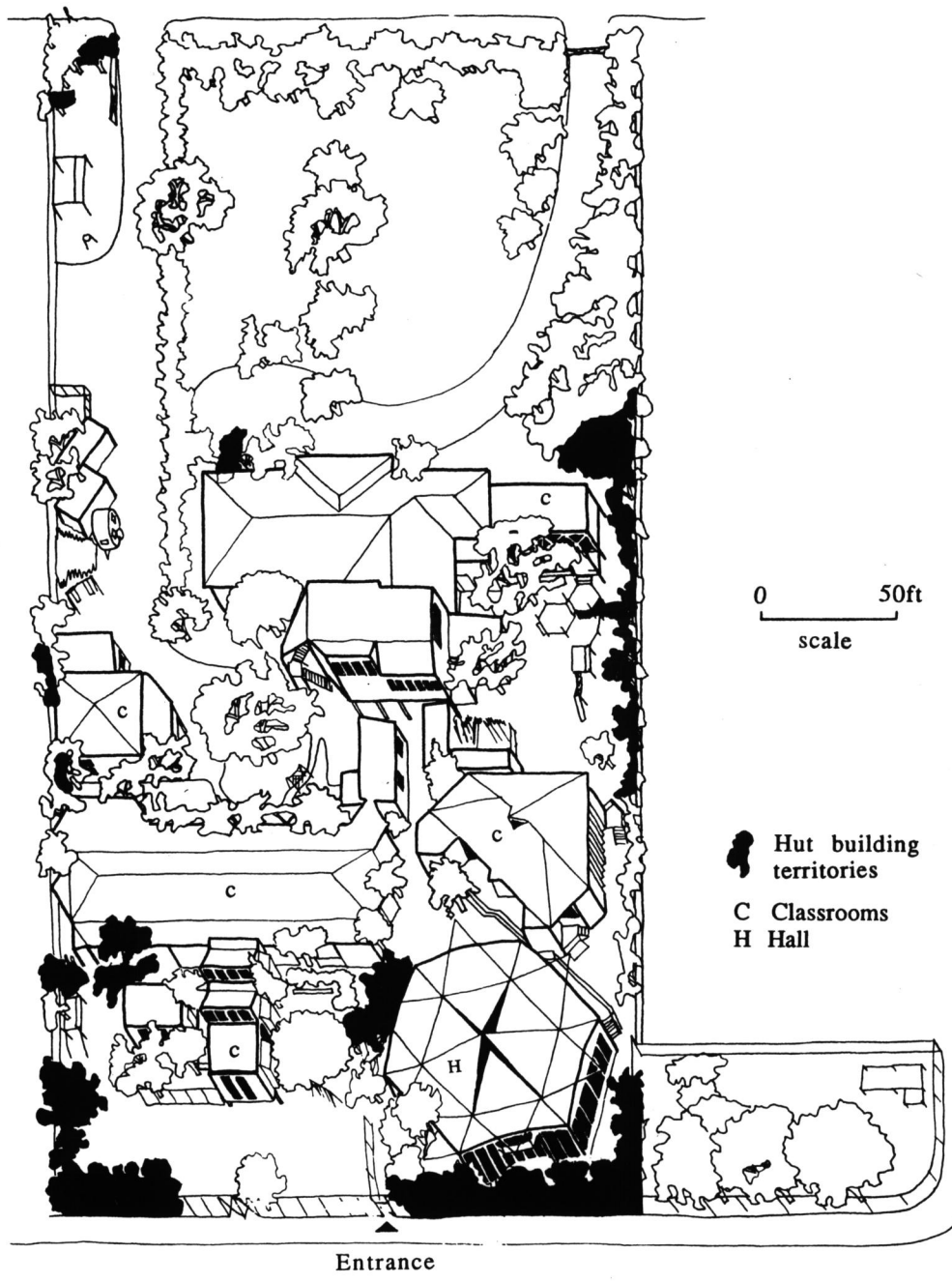


Figure 1 - Hut Building Territories, 1980

Figure 1. Hut building territories, 1980.

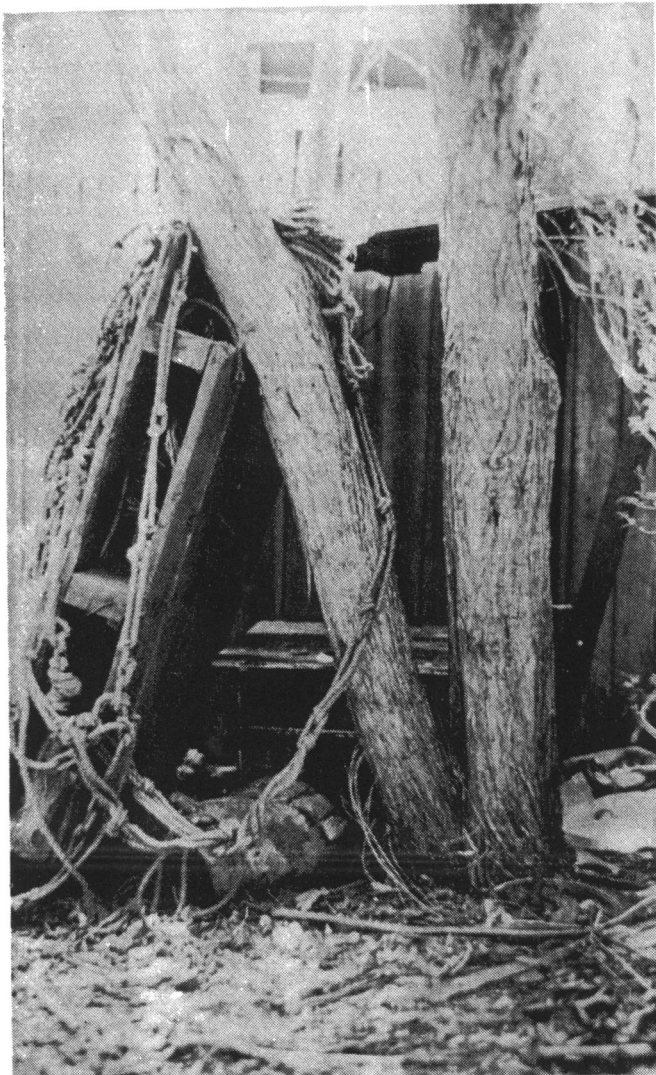


Figure 2. Five year old's hut, 1980.

practicing their domestic skills. It was very much a sense of what you did in the hut."

These huts, it seems, were settings for a socializing process, indeed for the reproduction of gender roles. While the huts were only one course high, they also carried strong territorial rights and formed a substantial subdivision of the rear playground. They were capable of an almost instant expansion into a new room or wing, perhaps to accommodate a new member. This kind of hut began to disappear during the 1960s due to changing gender roles and a rising playground density which made the minimal territorial markers vulnerable.

The second kind of hut, also at ground level, was more constructed and enclosed with boards and sheets of plywood. In the very early days there were some freestanding huts (Figure 3), but for the most part these developed in rows up against the back and side fences, one section of which became known as "hut alley" (Figure 4).

The third kind of hut was the tree house. These consisted of anything from a small platform constructed in the forks of a peppercorn tree to a fully enclosed hut to accommodate up to five people (Figures 5 & 6). In general

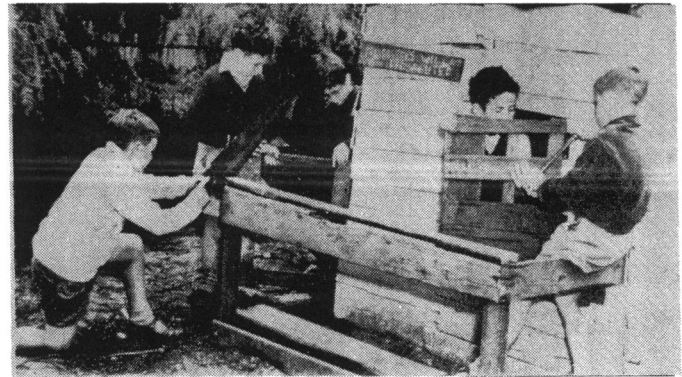


Figure 3. Early free standing hut, undated (Preshil Archives).

main types of huts. Until about 1970, when the school population was lower and more play space was available, the open hut was common. This was at ground level with bricks, logs, or lines scuffed in the dirt marking out walls and rooms. A former student comments:

"They were really ground plans that were one course high, people would collect spare bricks and things and they would mark out the ground plan and exist comfortably in it. A lot of activity went into the furnishing of those huts with bits of glass and china and domestic paraphernalia... I think those were girls' huts normally, whereas the ones that involved hammers and nails and full scale walls and roofs tended to be boys' huts. You had to lay out your hut in a place where no grass grew, under the peppercorn trees and where you could sweep the dirt. I remember that being a very important activity, sweeping... I think they were one course high because people were not so much interested in the actual construction of the hut, but in



Figure 4. "Hut Alley," 1980.

the tree huts were more open than the ground huts, but there is evidence that they became more enclosed over time with an increased need for privacy. Peppercorn trees (*Schinus molle*) are an introduced evergreen species that grow to about 20 feet with low gnarled branches and a

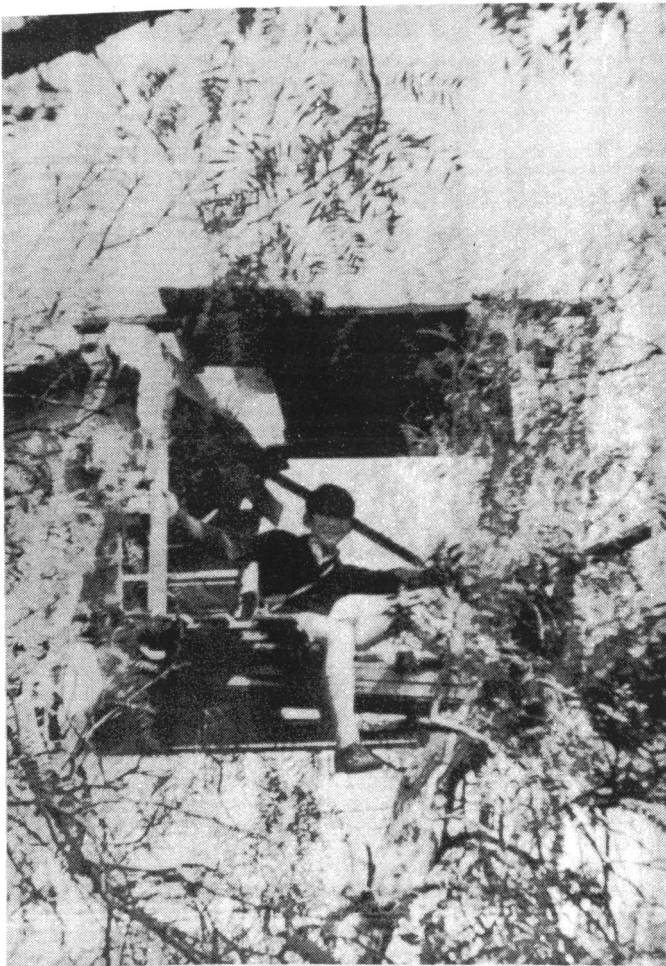


Figure 5. Early tree hut, undated (Preshil Archives).

drooping foliage. They are easily climbed by children from about age six, and have heavily scented resin and reddish berries ("peppercorns"). There are about twenty such trees lining the rear and side boundaries of the property. These and the areas under them have formed the major hut building territories at Preshil.

Hut building processes

These last three kinds of huts were built by the "biggies" with the strongest involvement by the eight to eleven year olds. They were often large and labyrinthine. A former student remembers:

"There were funny kinds of huts that kind of clambered up the side of the big stump and sort of sat on the top. It was really quite a triumph of constructive ingenuity."

Materials were generally in short supply. They consisted of boards from old packing crates, materials donated by parents and the odd piece of galvanized iron, canvas or carpet. One interviewee likened the huts to a kind of palimpsest:

"Planks and other fragments that we built into huts were in some respects like Chinese paintings which are stamped with the seals of successive owners. Lying on your back inside your hut you could almost say this bit

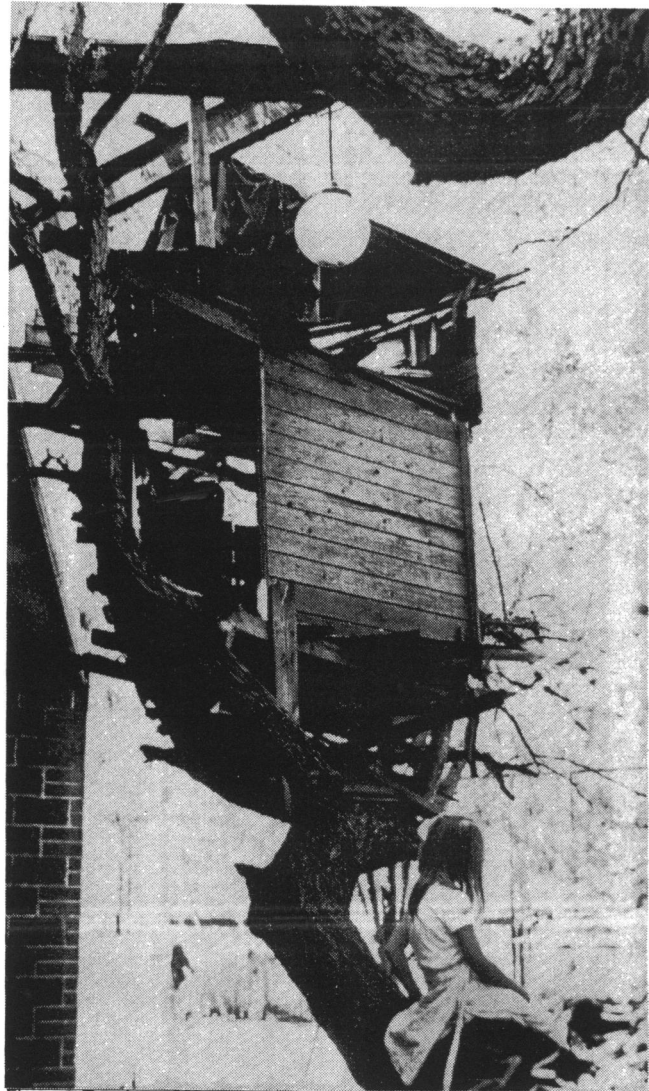


Figure 6. Tree hut, 1980.

of Oregon supporting the roof was the doorpost in Jerry's hut and before that Philip and Ian used it for..."

The storage of materials was itself an integral part of the hut building process, which, in an interesting contrast to the formal educational life, was fiercely competitive. This was a competition for both materials and sites:

"All of the stuff that you needed for your hut was already part of the fabric of someone else's. So deciding to build a hut was really deciding to demolish by stealth or direct assault whichever huts had the best bits of wood and the gang least able to retaliate."

While the open huts on the ground were largely gendered, the constructed ones were less so, there were female gangs and mixed gangs. There is a well remembered story of a girl whose gang established control over most of the best materials and built a hut that was the wonder of the school until it was demolished early one morning and the materials dispersed instantly. Another famous female hut was built in the 1960s of two rooms with

windows, a door, garden and fence. It was even painted inside and called "Megamajuli" after the six builder/designers (Megan, Georgina, Mary, Angie, Julia and Liz). In contrast to the open female huts built on the ground, the more constructed huts both on the ground and in the trees were used less after construction:

"I don't really remember playing in them much. They were usually built, left for a while, pulled down and then another one was built. It's the building—getting there is all the fun."

The constructed huts didn't have the flexibility to grow instantly as the open huts did, so as peer groups reformed the tendency was to demolish and rebuild. However, this complete reconstruction was most common on the ground. In the trees most major hut sites developed a kind of stable framework which served as a support for many generations of huts, an activity that could be described as renovation:



Figure 7. Back fence hut, stage one, September 1980.

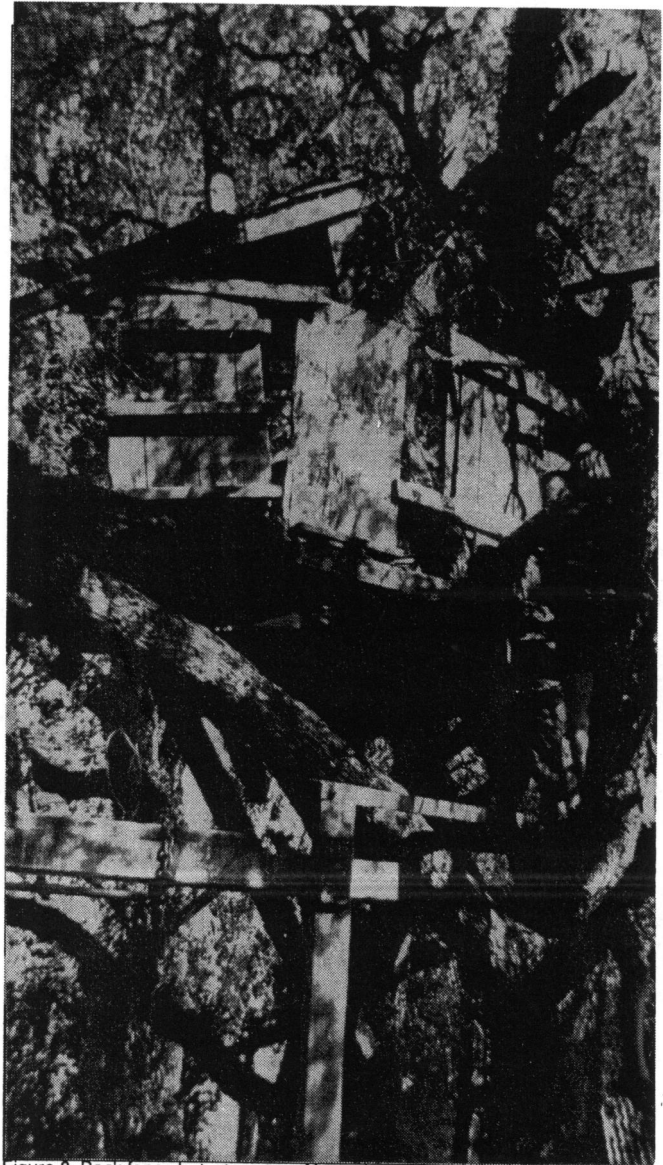


Figure 8. Back fence hut, stage two, November 1980.

"Most of the huts were there when we got there and then when you arrived you'd say, "Oh I like the look of that!" and you just jump in and claim it and make a few adjustments and put curtains up. They were already half built and then we'd come in and just put a few more boards in and make it a bit different, the basics were always there and what you did was made it your personality."

Figures 7 and 8 show the same tree in various stages of this continual transformation.

Social meaning

The hut building was a process of informal negotiation of social reality. The hut was a concretization of peer group identity and power in space, as well as a refuge from the larger school population:

"It was a sort of exciting place where just you and your

friends could be... the huts were your friends, your place, you could meet there..."

Sometimes the huts reflected the "islands" or clusters of desks at which the children worked in the classrooms, or an "island" group would become guests in someone else's hut:

"We used to have island parties... everyone would bring a piece of food and everyone would go into your hut and have a big party. We did used to have people visit. An island is made of friends."

The meaning of the huts as refuges became more important as space became scarce, but it has always been a component. Huts were fiercely private, entry being assured only by involvement in construction:

"No one else was allowed in except the shareholders. So you can have a partnership with your friends and have a chat or whatever and go in there and do whatever you like. You could be invited in there if you didn't help build it, (but) if they said no you couldn't go..."

Privacy was achieved through such informal rules, signs

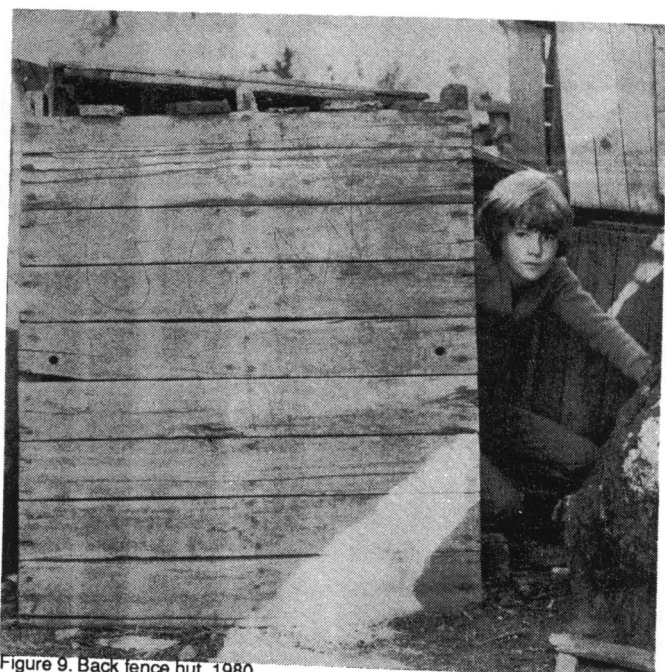


Figure 9. Back fence hut, 1980.

... painted on boards or through sheer inaccessibility. The signs tended to be more prolific at ground level where access was easy (Figure 9). The use of the huts in the latter stages varied from solitary activities such as just being alone or reading, to hut parties or lunch, to illicit activities such as smoking or throwing things on passersby. A very important activity in the tree huts was spying—seeing without being seen:



Figure 10. "Hut Alley," 1980.

"You knock holes, little triangle holes, and then you have curtains across them, pull the curtains and spy."

Perhaps most important, hut building represented the realm of school life where children were in control most completely. The form of the huts from the outside seems to have been of very little concern, rather site, size, degree of enclosure, ownership and privacy were the dominant concerns. As a result the appearance to adult eyes was always ragged (Figure 10), even as described by an adolescent remembering back to the 1970s:

"Hut alley looked absolutely repulsive... it was very messy, very badly done, they were all put together with... just a few plants, they weren't actually designed, a couple of planks here and a space there for your door, the side of a crate, just hammer it on and stick a board there. Revolting painting saying "keep out" in red, and a bit of corrugated iron on top."

Yet there was an order of a different kind, the order of

enclosure, privacy and control, the social and spatial order of the relations of people and the huts, and of these to the school itself. It was an experienced socio-spatial order rather than an orderly visual image, an order that stemmed from the integration of social process with the physical environment. At an age when the children were exploring roles and identities and abandoning them just as quickly, this process took visible form in the hut landscape. And the landscape was as dynamic as the personal and social transformations of the children themselves as they learned and grew.

Changes

Hut building changed a good deal throughout the history of the school, particularly as the population increased and the buildings encroached on play and hut building space. With the increasing competition for huts there was also increased levels of disputation, and the six to eight year olds found it difficult to build, claim or maintain huts. A former student and later a parent compares the 1970s with the 1940s:

"It seemed to me that only the most dominant people were able to build huts because they alone could, cuckoo like, shoulder enough space to reserve for their own use. Whereas in my time anyone could build a hut. There would be a place they could call theirs, whether it was just a place they played or whatever... The density of population is so very much higher that huts have come much more a refuge, a place where people can have a corporate identity that they can affirm in relation to the rest of the school."

Disputes about huts were originally resolved by the children, with teachers only getting involved in extreme situations. Indeed, the hut building activities are remembered from early days with a mixture of fear and excitement. In the early 1970s children began to ask increasingly for adult involvement in disputes. As a result a "hut committee" was formed and some rules were negotiated with the teachers' help. One rule was that six weeks of non-use by a hut builder meant the relinquishment of any claim over either site or materials:

"The first person to move in and claim it takes it. You set out a piece of property and put up a sign that says "keep out" ...in six weeks someone can pull down that sign and put up their own. Of course there's people who will argue about it."

Another rule was that any new tree house platform had to have a teacher jump on it to determine its stability. This rule emerged from the adult community but it was respected by the children. At the same time as the huts were becoming more difficult to appropriate, they were also seen by the headmistress as increasingly important psychologically:

"They need their own little places because the world isn't giving them that any more."

The demise of the huts

In 1981 hut building ceased abruptly under orders from the Fire Department. There had been fires in huts on two occasions, in 1973 and again in 1981, probably caused by smoking or playing with matches coupled with the use of flammable furnishings. Both fires were extinguished without any problems and children were never in danger because egress from the huts was never difficult, but word got around. In 1981 a grandmother of one child complained to the Fire Department. It is not clear whether this was because of fire danger, or the generally ragged appearance of the huts, perhaps both. As part of a general report on fire safety in the school the authorities were critical of the huts as well as the supplies of combustible "loose parts" that were left lying around and which constituted the major resource for hut building. These they termed "accumulated waste and unnecessary combustible materials." They ordered the "treehouses to be dismantled and removed" and "frequent and prompt removal of all combustible materials." The school headmistress who had always been a supporter of the hut building activity did not accept the demise of such a long standing school tradition easily. She invited a fire official to come and convince the children of the danger believing perhaps they would convince him of the importance of the huts, but the order stood.

The aesthetic issue was, however, also an important factor in the demise of the huts. The most prolific hut areas, including "hut alley," were along the back fence, clearly visible to neighbors and passersby. The school had purchased a new site around the corner in the immediate neighborhood towards which the huts faced, and was applying for planning approval to develop it against substantial residential opposition. A good deal of this opposition to the school's development was based on the ragged disorder of the huts and the prejudices they aroused. Development approval was seen by the school council as necessary for the school's success in terms of both growth and relief from the congestion at Arlington. Some children tried to deal with the aesthetic problem by painting their huts green to help them blend in. However, the huts were finally demolished with the understanding that they would be revived again once development approval had been given. In a sense the expression of the children's identity had been traded for the expression of the larger school identity. The battle for planning approval was lost and still the problems of accommodation remained. Further battles ensued to develop on other sites. Neighborhood and Fire Department disapproval remained as issues and the huts were never revived in the same manner.

Formal huts

The loss of the huts remained a sore point among both staff and children for some time. In 1984 hut building was revived in a different form in an area at the opposite end of the school. Known as the front garden, this was a more formal play space, facing onto a major street. Huts had never been built there. It was planted with grass and a variety of trees but without the peppercorns of the rear area. The huts began with a class project, limited to the oldest children (10 and 11 years) whereby they were to simulate a



Figure 11. Formal hut, front garden, 1985.

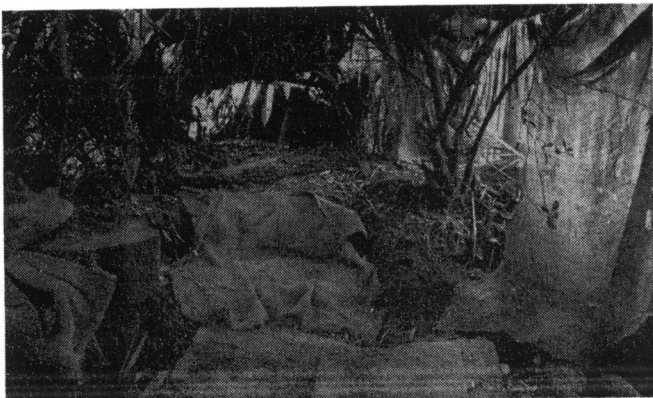


Figure 12. Hut interior, front garden, 1985.

preindustrial community, building huts in groups using preindustrial materials and techniques. It was quite common for class projects to involve the transformation of various parts of the school grounds. Rules were set by teachers—all huts were to be on the ground, and they must not be visible from the street. These regulations excluded boards and packing crates and led to the use of branches and leaves for good camouflage. About ten huts were built during this project, they tended to be larger than the original huts because the groups of children were larger (Figures 11 & 12). Some of the huts were half underground with seats hollowed out of the earth. These huts were essentially different from the originals. The children would talk about them with enthusiasm, but they spoke mainly about the attempts at camouflage:

“There were random checks of all the huts so the neighbors couldn’t see them, or anyone walking past. So we were pretending that the neighbors were cannibals and the cannibals weren’t allowed to see. That’s why we had to build them out of natural materials.”

They were also very aware that this was a different type of hut that was very much a response to the neighbors and the Fire Department:

“No one’s allowed to build any more huts unless they’re for special things... It was work, we were learning things from it. I mean we’d learn things from building our own huts as well, but they don’t think of it that way.”

By the following year about half of these huts had been demolished and the others had been re-appropriated and renovated in various ways. However, these huts were not capable of swift transformations due to the materials, the construction and the care required for the external image. The huts were remnants of a class project rather than an integrated part of playground culture. They did not stem from spontaneous human agency and the negotiation of social identity. With the rules and the concern for aesthetics, this hut building process was formal and other-directed, by 1986 it had largely ceased.

Concluding comments

What lessons might the case of the Arlington huts hold for our understanding of children’s environments? I think it stands as an example of the manner in which the childhood imperative for place-making can be integrated into the schoolground as a spontaneous and meaningful cultural practice. In a context where urban wildlands are being eradicated and children’s access to the landscape is increasingly diminished by cars and crime, the possibilities for place-making activities as a part of school life become more important. In this regard, there were several interrelated factors in the success at Arlington. These are: the settings that provided opportunities; their integration into the school; the children’s control over the process; and adult protection of the process.

The settings in this case were the trees and the appropriated space along the fence line. However, I believe that it was also significant that these settings were not set away in a pre-ordained “hut zone” but were spatially integrated with the rest of the school. The main entrance came past “hut alley” and the hall entrance—the symbolic center of the school—was dominated by two large tree huts (Figure 1). This integration ensured that there was no need for formal supervision of hut building activities, teachers were available without exerting any formal control. Hut building was a by-product of everyday life in the school, operating in the interstices of organized space and time. In this regard it paralleled the hut building process in the wider environment which is a kind of by-product of neighborhood life. Thus a subtle arms-length relationship between children and teachers was maintained that ensured reasonable safety together with genuine child control. This was sustained by a deeply held belief throughout the adult sector of the school community that hut building was part of a very important educational process, but one that must belong to the children.

The formal hut building process provides a contrast to some of these factors. Huts were limited to the front garden, more separated from school life. The fence line and the trees could not be used so the hut typology was limited to ground huts which were damp in winter. Loose parts were limited to branches and leaves which take longer to build with and have fewer cycles of use than other materials. The

concern for camouflage changed the focus from internal social relations to external relations with residents. The subtle maintenance of child control was weakened and the process was robbed of spontaneity.

Finally, there may be a lesson here in how the hut building process proved to be vulnerable, not only to the aesthetic prejudices of an adult community, but also to the development activities of the very institution that enabled the process to grow in the first place and to continue for forty years. The socially negotiated expression of identity in the built environment at one level (the children and their development) came into conflict with exactly the same process at a larger scale (the school and its development). While the school's response in tidying the environment for the purposes of public relations is understandable, it highlights the fact that the quest for high quality children's environments involves political battles. Children's huts are healthy places, but they do not easily find a niche in the urban social ecology and they are quite easily destroyed

when they do. It may be that the involvement of children in the "politics of place" is not only necessary to the quest, but can also open up new learning opportunities for both children and adults.

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