

Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land, Gussow (1972) defined place as "a piece of the environment that has been claimed by feelings. We are homesick for places ... and the catalyst that converts any physical location into a place is the process of experiencing deeply." To experience a place deeply is to bond with a place.

The roots of the adult notion of a sense of place are established during middle childhood. Rachel Carson's "sense of wonder" of early childhood gets transmuted in middle childhood into a "sense of exploration." Children leave the security of home behind and set out, like Alice in Wonderland and Columbus to discover the new world. In the process, children create new homes, homes away from home. These homes become the new safe places, small worlds created from the raw materials of the natural world and their flexible imaginations. These new homes in the wild, and the journeys of discovery, are the basis for bonding with the natural world. As we bonded with our parents in the early years, we bond with Mother Earth in middle childhood.

The significant world, the world with which we bond, expands outward as we grow older. The infant's world is the enclosed space between its mother's arms. The world then becomes the house, the neighborhood, the community, the bio-region, the nation, and, perhaps, the planet. Through the successive stages of human development, we maintain our old relationships but move outward to bond with new spheres of significance. If this process is to continue to expand, then each bonding must occur in sequence. Feeling a sense of place in adulthood leads to a commitment to preserve the integrity of the communities in which we live. Developing this sense of place depends on the previous bonding of the child with the close natural world during middle childhood. The sense of place is born in children's special places.

Education in harmony with development should, among other things, create adults with a sense of individual initiative and a sense of responsibility to the natural and social worlds. How do we accomplish this? One way we can help is to acknowledge, in our education, the world-making tendencies of the individual. During middle childhood, this means allowing the child to find and create private worlds. A few schools have created programs with this goal.

A rural New Hampshire first-grade teacher created an Explorers Club that meets Wednesday afternoons. As a base of explorations, the children created a fort, and then each child found his or her own special spot in the vicinity of the fort. During winter, the children created indoor forts and, eventually, miniature models

of forts. Remembering the year, the teacher said, "We would just go up into the woods, the children would go off to their special spots, and things would start to happen. They seemed so placid and calm and self-directed when we were there" (Figure 3).

For fourth graders (9- and 10-year-olds), listening to a reading of *My Side of the Mountain* (George, 1959) is a sure-fire winner. The character Sam Gribble's construction of the ultimate fort, the hollowed-out inside of a giant hemlock tree, spawns construction fantasies in children. When a Vermont teacher encouraged shelter building as a follow-up project to do at home, many children in his class took him up on it. Children constructed shelters using only natural materials, wrote a descriptive report, and provided drawings and photographs.

Middle-school children (sixth graders) in Concord, New Hampshire, participated in the Game of Village over the course of an entire year. Using a scale of 1:24, students created miniature selves that homesteaded wild land, first creating a primitive shelter, then a crafted home, and finally the infrastructure, services, and economy of a village settlement (Iselin, 1987). All the subject areas of the curriculum were integrated in this simulation, which fully realized Cobb's directive to "make a world in which to find a place to discover a self."

These are but a few examples of how educators can acknowledge the unique world-making desires of middle childhood and shape curricula to provide appropriate experiences for children. If we allow people to shape their own small worlds during childhood, then they will grow up knowing and feeling they can participate in shaping the big world tomorrow.

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Refuge and Imagination: Places of Peace in Childhood

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I draw fragments from a large sample of environmental autobiographies to explore the theme of the need for children to escape from the strictures of the adult world to places of refuge and peace, places to dream. Such places are often remembered in autobiographical writing and occur at every scale from a cupboard to a broad landscape. They are described with great passion and are claimed by the authors to have significantly contributed to their mental health. It is this two-sided experience, both negative and positive, both refuge and imaginative dreaming, that this article explores.

As part of a truly marvelous piece of environmental autobiography, *12 Elphinstone Street*, Malouf (1986) included the following description of the underside of his childhood house in Brisbane:

Down here is the underside of things: the great wedge of air on which the house floats, ever darkness; the stumps of a forest of which the house, with its many rooms, forms the branches; a place whose dimensions are measured, not in ordinary feet and inches, but in heartbeats, or the number of seconds you can endure the sticky-soft lash of cobwebs against your mouth, or the weight of your body, at kneecap and palm, on crunchy cinders ... There is room for error here, for movement, for escape. So you crawl down here when the ordinary feet and inches of the house, its fixed times and rules, will not fit. Or when you won't. To come down here, up under the floorboards and the life of rooms, is to enter a dream space, dark, full of terrors that lurk behind tree-trunks in the thickest forest, hob-goblins, old gods, but full as well of the freedom and mystery of a time before houses—the old-new, gloomy-glad world where hammers and nails and planks of wood are inhabited by spirits that listen and respond, and where bodies, with no awareness of space or time, expand, contract, float, lapse into dreaming. (pp. 46-47)

Here Malouf set up a spatiotemporal opposition between the world of the adult and that of the child, between the "fixed times and rules" of "the life of rooms" and the "dream space" of "freedom and mystery" with "room for error here, for movement, for escape." This is where you go when you "won't fit." Although there is no suggestion here of escape from violence or severe oppression, such problems are not uncommon, and it would be useful to know more about the role of special places in enabling

children to survive and thrive with their mental health intact.

ON METHOD

Environmental autobiographies offer one method of achieving insight into the importance of these places of peace in childhood. Although autobiographies suffer from distortions of memory, they also benefit from the filtering out of mundane description to reveal aspects of environmental meaning that carry enough emotional power to persist in memory. Such a method also overcomes the problem that, if these places are at once personal, secret, and fundamentally important to the child, their meanings are unlikely to be revealed in research on children themselves because the meaning may well be withheld to protect it.

The quotations that follow are direct transcripts from environmental autobiographies written by students of environmental design at three universities in the United States and Australia from 1982 to 1987.¹ My use of autobiographies as a research method is phenomenological in the sense that I explicitly asked for experiential depth in descriptions of childhood environments. The assignment was often launched through a group exercise to gain clear access to relevant memories. Students were directed to explore their memories at a variety of scales, including interiors and exteriors. The autobiographies were generally in the form of a 12-ft scroll that subjects were asked to fill with writing and drawing, proceeding with a narrative from the earliest memories of place until either childhood or the scroll ran out (Figure 1).

Quotations were selected for transcription on the judgment that they revealed something of importance

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about the depth of environmental experience in childhood. From a total of more than 300 autobiographies, selected quotations were transcribed and analyzed according to themes. This article describes one theme that emerged: places of refuge and imagination. However, it is not the result of a

quantitative content analysis of these autobiographies and should not be read as such. The aim is depth of understanding rather than breadth of explanation (Seamon, 1982). It is within this framework that these fragments of childhood experience are presented. The descriptions proceed from small to large scale.

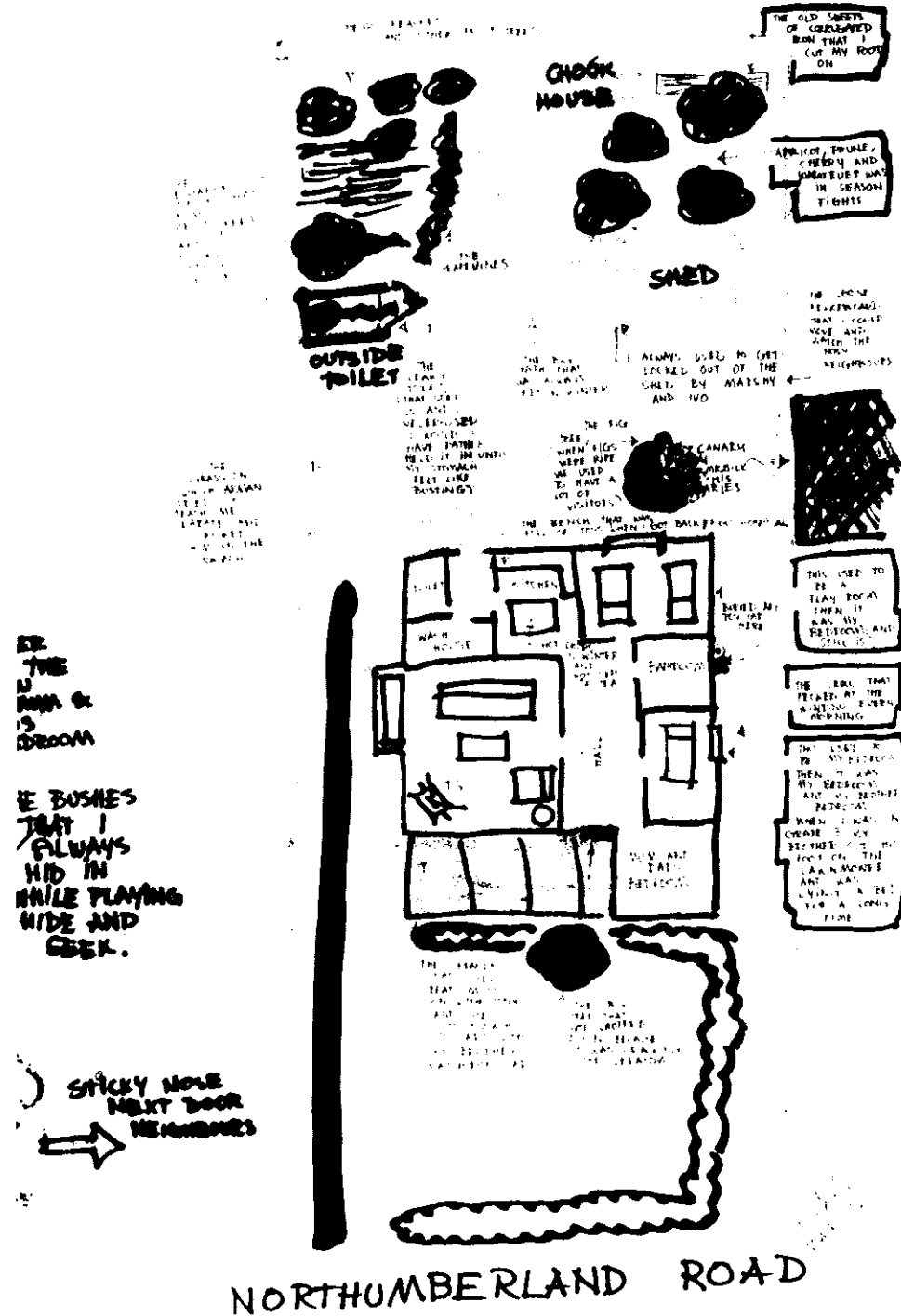


FIGURE 1 Autobiographical drawing of house and garden.

INTERIOR PLACES

Many of the places remembered with most emotional power in environmental autobiographies reveal both a sense of refuge from an adult world and a growing sense of autonomy and imaginative independence. There are examples of the interior environment being used for pure refuge: "cupboards to hide from parents' rampages" or "under bed—ideal refuge from raging mother." Hiding places are, however, of temporary importance rather than lasting meaning. Yet, they may take on a positive aspect when they offer refuge from the pressures of adult demand rather than anger or violence. The smallest of such places are cupboards, closets, and small rooms:

I remember discovering this old cupboard during a game of hide and seek when I was about three and a half.... I dived into the dark cavernous space closing the door behind me. Immediately I was transformed into another world, a world of my own. The warmth, isolation and security of the wardrobe were incredible. I felt as though this place was all my own.... For years this cupboard remained my secret place of escape, a place where I could be all alone—a quiet place to think.

One of these adult pressures is the demand to be happy or to fill a certain role that can lead to the need for a place to cry in secret, a place to exercise the right to one's own sadness:

[I spent] many hours in the closet by myself—reading, dreaming, crying.... This is the place I used to go to think.... It is so peaceful I can really concentrate on what I want, not what everyone else tells me—I used to daydream a lot and make plans for my life. Here I hoped for so many things and ... when I did not get them I would cry. This was the only place where I could cry without anyone finding out. This was my secret hideout where I was anything I wanted to be and dreamed of being famous one day.

In this passage, the double meaning of the place is apparent. The sense of refuge is at the same time a release for creative imagination.

The small scale and the design of these places are usually important, as in a room under a staircase:

The Red Room: The smallest room in the whole house—so petite and squeezey yet it was my favourite room. I loved its shape. It wasn't like the average box shaped room ... and it was painted red with a glossy finish. It was under the staircase so there were traces of the stairs on the ceiling ... This was fascinating as the stairs changed direction above ... I used to love to hide in this room on my own whenever I had a secret or something that I wanted to experience on my own and not share like a feeling or emotion ... often it was a good place just to hide and be on my own ... It was so different to school, kitchen, family room and garden as it was so miniature and had such a warm character it was like being sucked into a hot vibrant red pair of lips. So soft, reassuring, yet also

very individual. A room that shared so much of myself, one of my best friends.

In this case, the design lends character and suggests an organic metaphor. Each of these quotations reveals the two-sided experience of a place that is at once an escape or refuge and a place of discovery and dreaming.

At a larger scale, the bedroom can fulfill a similar role of refuge. Note, however, that the following quotations lack the emotional power and the sense of dreaming and discovery of the earlier ones:

My bedroom which reminded me of my cubby house ... sense of possession, authority. I could do what I liked in my room, pull down the blind and lock the door when I wanted to.

My bedroom was to me my domain, my territory. It was seen as something personal, a part of myself. I felt very confident in it. I saw it as a kingdom where I was the ruler and lord.

I liked the [bed]room a lot.... It just seemed homey, it was somewhere that I could call my own ... somewhere for me to go when I needed to be alone, like when I'd get into arguments.... This room was and still is a place to hold my memories of growing up.

A sense of separation from the house can help provide a sense of refuge. The following is a description of a backyard shed:

This was my special haven ... I loved the fact that I could pull the blind down and lock the door and no one could hear or see what I was doing ... I decided when to pull the blind ... I was anyone I wanted to be in the cubby house and I didn't have to worry that an elder brother was observing and sniggering.

The common themes in these descriptions of interior environments are the relatively small scale, the privacy, and, in many cases, the child's autonomy to choose or discover the place. A dilemma arises when designers plan interior environments with certain "children's activities" in mind: The activities come with an adult endorsement that robs them of their offer of refuge from the adult world. For example, Alexander et al. (1977) endorsed a design pattern called a "Child's Cave," which derives from an observation of childhood delight in small-scale nooks in the house. The autobiographies in this article, however, suggest that the Child's Cave would better serve the purposes of childhood discovery, refuge, and imagination if it were designed for something else instead.

BACKYARD TREES

An interesting theme in environmental autobiographies—noted before by Chawla (1986), Cobb (1959), and Cooper Marcus (1978)—is the bias toward outdoor memories, which is out of all propor-

tion to the amount of time spent there. This bias is also reflected in memories of places of peace. The most common peaceful place within easy access of home is the backyard treetop, one of the few places in the yard where adults never go:

Golden Elm ... I always climbed to my favorite fork when I wanted to escape being told off ... a total feeling of solitude.

The willow tree in our backyard was our favourite thing from about four until it was cut down when I was eight. It was a cool shady place in summer that wavered in the wind like a hula skirt. It smelt like cut grass. It was the centre of my childhood fantasies. The branches served as whips for horses, swords for duels, hair for mermaids.... When I was angry or upset I used to sit far above the world swaying in the breeze in the comfortable curve of its topmost branches. There I was isolated, curtained by green leaves.... It had a very soothing effect on me and left a big gap in my feelings when it disappeared.

There are examples of trees where the emotional power of the memory is strong but without the element of refuge. They are places of sheer pleasure and peace:

My favourite tree—I would spend many an evening just sitting there watching the view and the sunset. Here I would think and contemplate life. Lying comfortably on a branch, breathing the cool evening breeze and eating the fruit of the tree was the most heaven like experience I ever felt. I was at peace in this tree.

As with the Red Room, tree places may be personalized, setting up an imaginary social relationship:

One of my favourite places to escape and tell my worries to was the big apple tree in my back yard. This tree whom I called "Ratafigio" (which is the Greek word for refuge) was a place to hide and repent for my misdoings, to observe the activities below me without being seen. It was my refuge and for once I was able to talk and have someone that would always agree with what I was saying.... This enabled me to love and treasure the tree.

In a world controlled by adults, however, such places are vulnerable. The autobiography continues:

Arriving home I discovered ... the killing of my tree. The tree which I called home was no longer around for me to seek refuge in, to hide or to observe secretly. I could not bear to look at it nor could I bear to plant another tree.

Tree houses and huts add a further dimension to this experience:

The place I recall with the most fondness is a tree house.... It was ugly but sturdy. Its appearance didn't matter because the tree hid all but a small portion of it and the view was unbelievable.... It was such a peaceful place. Birds became things to watch. It was

fun up in the tree house because I could see everything and no one could see me.... I loved the climb too ... each limb I was aware of and I felt they liked me using them. My tree had such a perfect shape too. Every limb was custom made for my legs, feet and hands. The tree had an enormous effect on my mood. When I came up there, the clean air gave me a clear head to see all.

That last sentence is an example of the environmental determinism common in environmental autobiographies: Many people give credit to the environment for having made them feel a certain way as children or for changing them as people.

Not all trees that figure strongly in environmental memory are in backyards. Trees proliferate in rural areas and also occur in streets and schoolyards (Dovey, 1987). However, meaningful trees are almost all climbable. The treetop place embodies several themes that recur in environmental autobiographies: refuge from the adult world, seeing without being seen, vertical separation from everyday life, contact with nature, and involvement in construction (in the case of huts). It is difficult to unravel these themes, but it is clear that trees fill an important role as places of peace for children. And, although trees are longer in development than a "Child's Cave," they more easily escape the dilemma of being designed for orderly discovery, as they are part of a broader landscape that serves other purposes as well.

LANDSCAPE

Beyond the immediate neighborhood, examples of such peaceful places are primarily about establishing a certain distance from people and a closeness with nature.

This was the first place, except for my bedroom, where I just liked to sit and look at things. I would pack my lunch and ride out there just to sit in the sun and feel like I had my own place. What was really good was that I never saw a single other person anywhere near it.

[I] remember using the creek as a retreat when I was upset. I remember running away from home one time and running straight to the creek.

The place of refuge here may be a path through a landscape rather than a specific locality, with separation from people a key criterion:

The paths through the forest and fields were my favourite places.... They had a mysterious quality because they seemed to never end. I would come to the path to be alone.

This was my favourite place to hike when I was down or sad. There is a deep valley between two hills that shielded out civilization. One cannot hear anything but birds, cannot see any houses, and can only smell the myriad of plants.

Access to these places is available only to older children and those in a more rural setting.

Some memories are of a less solitary experience—group refuges:

The forest—my true home.... We built a house for ourselves made out of dry sticks, newspaper and palm leaves. Here was where we escaped from our little apartments. We had lunch here and took our little afternoon naps.

Fort—this was our place where we were in charge and we did what we wanted to by group decision.... We could see anyone coming up the hill, so this gave us superiority and security.... It was also a hiding place surrounded on all sides by thick bamboo. There was a sense of security. Only kids our size could fit through the passage.

Another landscape type that fills this role of refuge and peace is the beach:

If I am upset, angry or afraid I go to the beach, especially at sunset.

With the cool breeze blowing through the space from the sea, looking at the horizon and the setting sun makes me so close with nature and yet so far because of the congested houses.

Finally, there are examples of the kind of transcendent experiences in relation to the natural environment that Cobb (1959) argued to be at the heart of creative development in children:

I recall standing on a rock and reaching for the sky half-way past a mountain...I thought of the poetic ideal of oneness with nature, with being there alive and basically happy. The use of nature as a way to find some sort of peace of mind ... continues with many examples.... [I remember] sitting on a rock off Port Lonsdale on a windy day watching the waves. Somehow that day was special, those waves were powerful and I could drink in that energy.

DISCUSSION

It has not been my aim in this article to argue any specific cause-and-effect relationships or to develop

any general theory. Rather, my aim has been to relate these selective autobiographical fragments for the intrinsic insights they reveal. They are biased by the selection process and by the cultural and geographic experience of the subjects. The question that would seem to beg further research is that of the role of the physical environment in the development and sustenance of children's mental health. This involves not only the positive side of intellectual, emotional, and creative development, about which we know a good deal (Cobb, 1959; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Searles, 1960), but also the need to escape from violence and oppression, which can leave children scarred for life. Although children are largely stuck with the oppressions of their inheritance, places of peace—of escape and dreaming, of sanity and imaginative independence—can provide important opportunities that might enable these children to endure with sanity and imagination intact. And the same kinds of environmental opportunities may serve the gamut of refugees, whether they seek to escape from the tyranny of child abuse or societal pressure to conform to an unpalatable norm.

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