

Written evidence submitted by Joy Burgess [CBE 126]

GENERAL INFORMATION

Ideas around childhood and play developed enormously throughout the twentieth century. Children were often found to be at the centre of political debates about the future of Britain. This was for a number of complex reasons including concerns over the impact of war on children, a society undergoing enormous social changes and an evolving urban environment.

Children as Future Citizens

In postwar Britain there was a national concern that the experience of war would leave a lasting impact on a generation of children and this would give rise to further violence and even moral confusion. Along with this, throughout the war years, fathers had been absent and mothers found themselves entering the workplace, which disrupted what had been the normative social structures of family life. All of this played into an increasing collective anxiety that children were becoming unmoored. As society tried to grapple with these challenges, its understanding of childhood began to shift. Children, along with a vision of a stable family unit became tied up with an aspiration for a dependable, flourishing nation. Children were beginning to be seen as future citizens and potential leaders (Cowman, 2019). Having witnessed the impact of leadership going badly wrong on the global stage, the stakes seemed high. This brought with it a pressure to create the right conditions from which children could thrive and grow. King (2016) cites an article in *The Times* in 1943, when commenting on the 1942 Beveridge report, that claimed that 'were it necessary to choose between giving additional comfort and help to age or to childhood the priority would surely have to go to those to whom the future belongs'. This captures the national mood well.

Around this time we also see a change in the understanding of the role of play in childhood. Now well known theories including Jean Piaget's concepts of play to aid learning and growth, as well as Freud's belief that play was an important tool in the context of trauma, were beginning to filter into general discourse. As these theories were becoming a new kind of orthodoxy on the sociology of childhood, the problem of delinquency became connected to a politics of play. This meant the lack of play provision within Britain's towns and cities came under political scrutiny. From here there came a drive to address the issue, hints of which can be seen in the writing of government policy in postwar Britain (Cowman, 2019).

Children and Policy Making

Focusing on policies that would protect children became at least in part, nonpartisan and was an

important contribution to the support garnered for the welfare state. King (2016) argues that whilst there may have been some political consensus over the issue of the future citizenship of children, this was in reality a complicated picture. She outlines three competing political ideologies from mid-century Britain and shows how they rallied around a broad consensus of the meaning and experience of childhood. She argues that for the free-market individualist, children could be positioned in economic terms as investments. For a social-democratic perspective it was the belief that all citizens should be allowed to flourish and finally for the conservative concern, it was the belief that children were tomorrow's stewards of British values. And so at a point where social policy was shifting dramatically, children were one of the many focuses and benefactors. Cowman (2019) illuminates this by outlining a series of policies that show this shift in thinking. She lists, for example, the 1944 Education Act and how it makes reference to local authorities needing to allow provisions for the social and physical development of children; the 1948 Ministry of Education report and how it encourages the adoption of the 1944 Act to provide opportunities to play for children; the National Council of Social Services in 1961 and how it celebrates the increase in play provisions found in new housing developments. Cowman (2019) goes on to cite how in 1962, Margaret Thatcher sat on a committee reviewing the impact of high-rise living on family life and concluded that play provisions were vitally important in preventing future delinquency. Cowman (2019) further lists how in 1963 the Newsom report discusses the need for children to engage in physical activity outside of school hours and finally in 1973 how the Department of the Environment wrote an edition of their 'Design Bulletin' on the real and urgent need to make provisions for children to play.

This policy drive to improve provisions for children was not only led by concerns over issues of postwar delinquency, but coupled with this was a rapidly changing urban environment which was becoming less safe, particularly for children. The development of modern cities led to a need for a change in social behaviour too.

Children within a Changing Urban Environment

As mass access to the car began to increase rapidly in the 1920s, so too did concern over the safety of streets. The number of cars on the roads from the end of the war to the 1960s rose sharply along with a new dilemma over road safety. The number of road fatalities involving children was growing at a concerning rate. The role of the street in the lives of city dwellers was being disrupted. Where once both women and children had been two key stakeholders of the street as a social stage, children were now being arrested for playing games there. By 1926, Lady Astor told the House of Commons: 'There is no more pitiable sight in life than a child which has been arrested for playing in the street. Of all the pitiable sights that I have seen that is the most pitiable. Though these children may be fined, we stand convicted' (Hansard, 1926).

One interesting response to this change was the idea of the Play Street, which was led by a number of grassroots women's activists groups. Again, the government responded to this initiative by introducing the 1938 Play Streets concept and legislation, which grew in popularity so much so that there were 700 play streets across England and Wales in the 1950s (Cowman, 2017). Their demise, however, was as rapid as their ascent. Many organisations, including the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), began to express concern for children playing in streets at all and there was a general trend towards wanting to find designated spaces for children to be able to play safely.

Landscape Architecture: A Radical Design Response to the Social Concerns of Childhood

It is within this context of the post-war debates about childhood, road safety, citizenship and reconstruction, that we find something of a radical solution to these concerns, in a self-proclaimed landscape architect - Lady Allen of Hurtwood. She was herself something of a political figure as the spouse of Lord Clifford Allen, the former Independent Labour Party Leader, a pacifist, socialist and internationalist. Lady Allen was familiar with and highly effective in lobbying national and local government over her far reaching concerns for children. She had made real contributions to reforming the institutional care of orphans as well as having helped organise wartime nurseries, where war debris was used to create toys. Her advocacy gave rise to the 1948 Children Act which recognised children's basic human rights to things such as a loving home environment.

Lady Allen became synonymous with the Adventure Play Movement. Nils Norman (2003 p.29) states that 'seen within an architectural canon, adventure playgrounds are a microcosmic distillation of the playful possibilities of architecture, or a vernacular of play. This vernacular spirit arises from a community's resolution to find solutions to some quite specific problems within an exclusive built environment.' There appears a consensus amongst playground historians that the adventure play movement, led by Lady Allen, was part of the vanguard who, as a response to the national and international conversation around children, were developing pioneering theories of education that valued child-centred approaches to play. The adventure play movement was something of a radical landscape architectural articulation of the ideas that were circulating in postwar Britain. They promoted an altogether new vision for urban development at the time of reconstruction where so much was in flux.

Birmingham City Council: Play in the Post War Years

Between the wars, Birmingham city council garnered a name for itself as having built the most houses of any authority at that time, and yet it was still facing a dramatic shortage that was growing with each passing year. By the 1960s it was projected that Birmingham would have a housing shortfall of 30,000 within twenty years. Herbert Manzoni, the City's Engineer set about devising a strategy to address this problem with often contractor-designed tower blocks spread across the city and beyond.

Although many have villainised Manzoni over the housing of his time, his progressive planning also brought many celebrated pieces of architecture, not least the 1974 Birmingham Central Library.

In 1951 Alwyn Gwilym Sheppard Fidler was appointed as Birmingham Council's first City Architect and soon after he secured the appointment of the first Landscape Architect -

Mary Mitchell. Both Sheppard Fidler and Mitchell had been on design teams for the development of New Towns (for Sheppard Fidler, Crawley; for Mitchell, Stevenage) and they were highly influenced by the values that the New Towns embodied. Both were committed to a design led approach, with Sheppard Fidler a proud proponent of mixed developments as well as caring deeply about design quality.

Sheppard Fidler was responsible for the appointment of a landscape architect, having to persuade the Council of its value. Many were familiar with parks managers, but the notion of a landscape architect seemed new and uncertain. Despite the constant pressure for rapid building results, Sheppard Fidler did not sacrifice the landscape work, recognising the contribution it made to creating good housing. In many instances, he is quoted in committee meetings as advocating for masterplanning that could maintain existing trees where possible and keep a good balance between landscape and built form. In the end these sensibilities were found to be at odds with Manzoni's ruthlessly commercial drive to build houses on mass and at speed, and both Mitchell and Sheppard Fidler left the council in 1964. However, before their departure, they worked successfully together as a design partnership, and it is during these years in Birmingham that Mitchell made her name on the international stage as an enterprising playground designer.

As soon as Mitchell arrived at the department, she quickly set her focus on how she could bring change to Birmingham's landscapes. Play became an early focus along with the desire to bring playable sculpture into the landscape. She was vocal about her support for Lady Allen's Adventure Play approach and advocated for the use of hammers and nails for buildings dens instead of the traditional swings and roundabouts.

Mitchell quickly formed a collaborative relationship with

John Bridgeman was a local sculptor and educator - and together they set about an experiment of creating sculptures in Birmingham's landscapes. Speaking together at a Landscape Institute conference in 1960 Mitchell says this "As regards play equipment I have been particularly keen to get away from the traditional type and the bare tarmac areas surrounded by a high fence which one sees only too often. Being interested in play sculpture I set up a team soon after joining the City Architects' Department. The team consists of a sculptor, John Bridgeman, the City of Birmingham Direct Labour Building Department and myself. We submitted small scale models of play

sculpture to the House Building Committee, and they then commissioned the sculptor, John Bridgeman, to design and construct the first six pieces of play sculpture to be put up in Birmingham". The Birmingham Post ran an article in 1960 on their collaboration and show some prototypes of steel frame sculptures that they were working on at that time.

An article in Concrete Quarterly 1952 describes one of the sculptures of a small concrete bird sculpture nestled within a Birmingham housing landscape. There is a recognition not only of the unique play opportunities that the sculpture provides, but also the sense of place it gives to the housing and its landscape. This drive to use art within landscape reflected Mitchell's time working on the New Towns as well as a broader post war sensibility.

Mary Mitchell, Landscape Architect

Mitchell began to develop her own design language which had a strong and consistent aesthetic. Her designs, influenced by the adventure play movement, were large and ambitious in scale. She made bold statements in the landscape and created curiosity at every level. Unlike playgrounds that had gone before, she used ground modelling to create entirely playable landscapes. Mitchell believed a playground should activate the imagination but she also remained concerned for the aesthetics of the domestic landscape. She wanted her designs to tell a story and would seek out reclaimed objects that had playable potential. She once sourced an old barge that had carried coal on the Birmingham- Worcester canal, which was to become a pirate's ship. Mitchell's work was challenging the kinds of spaces that had been designed for play until now and brought with it an ambition and sense of playful risk-taking in all she did. Her design philosophy always began with the child first and looked for ways to alight the imagination and bring joy.

Lady Allen of Hurtwood's Design for Play pamphlet in 1964 heavily relied on the work of Mitchell and her Birmingham playgrounds. It described how the City of Birmingham's Housing policy was looking to provide a toddlers' playground with every block of flats of four storeys or more. This policy was developed, likely with Mitchell's involvement, despite there being no established playground standards at that time in Birmingham for children within the 5-12 year age group. The provision was calculated based on accessibility to local green spaces.

Mitchell was an important landscape architect as she was the first to be employed within Birmingham City Architects Department. She translated many of the values of the adventure play movement into council housing landscapes, bringing much needed provision to a generation of children. Her work embraced risk, creativity and the role of art within design. These are issues that remain relevant to today's housing and childhood concerns. There is much we can learn from her work.

Mitchell's Birmingham Housing Landscapes

Chamberlain Gardens Hawkesley

Farm Moat Estate

Curtis Gardens, Fox Hollies

Firs Estate

Lyndhurst Estate, Erdington

Kingshurst Estate

Poole Farm Flats

The Vale, The University of Birmingham Halls of Residence

Kent Moat Estate

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