

Play and the city

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Abstract

La città si è da sempre configurata come un “campo giochi” costituito da cortili, strade, aree verdi, zone appartate o abbandonate. Bambini e ragazzi colonizzavano questi spazi con una socialità ludica che era parte della loro formazione. Oggi, la condizione urbana vede l'infanzia sempre più “agli arresti domiciliari e scolastici”, impossibilitata a muoversi nel territorio se non in situazioni di libertà vigilata, inibita nella ricerca di quel “senso dell'avventura” che comprende le esperienze dove “correre il rischio” fa parte del gioco. Rispetto alla scuola, contro la definizione corrente di “ambiente di apprendimento” concepito soprattutto come spazio *indoor* didatticamente e tecnologicamente attrezzato, sosteniamo che il primo fondamentale ambiente di apprendimento sia l'ambiente esterno, quello naturale e sociale, a partire dalla dimensione più vicina del giardino della scuola o del territorio circostante.

The city has been always configured as a “playground” consisting of courtyards, streets, parks, and secluded or abandoned areas. Children and youth colonized these spaces with a playful socialisation that was part of their learning. Nowadays, the urban condition sees children more and more “under house and school arrest”, unable to move outside without adult supervision, and inhibited in their pursuit of a “sense of adventure,” which includes those experiences where “running a risk” is part of game. Today, the school considers its “learning environment” as an educationally and technologically equipped indoor space. In opposition to this idea, I argue that the first fundamental learning environment is the external one due to its natural and social traits, starting from the nearest space, which is that of the school or the surrounding area.

Parole chiave: città, gioco, educazione all'aperto, ambiente, avventura

Keywords: town, play, outdoor education, environment, adventure

The playful dimension of the city, from the perspective of childhood, can be described as the places and paths similar to what in ethology is called “territoriality”, that is, the definition of an area populated, marked, and defended by a group of animals who share social cohesion. Play, however, is an experience that has biological and adaptive roots in animals and therefore in the human species, as well, before those roots assume cultural connotations. In the opening pages of his main work *Homo ludens*, Johan Huizinga (1979) wrote: “Play is older than culture [...]. Animals have not waited for man to teach them to play” (p. 3).

Until recent decades, courtyards, sections of streets, rarely visited green areas, and temporary abandoned areas or zones deprived of any kind of use, were preferably the playing spaces occupied by groups of children or youngsters. In such spaces which played a vital part in building children's identity, all play activities were ruled by the group of peers, and any adult proposing or animating games were excluded. This aspect of play pertains to the pedagogy of self-education, based on relationships' symmetries rather than on the formal asymmetry of educational relationships (Caroni & Iori, 1989). This was a pedagogy that was both

authentic and impure: authentic because it provided training through living real experiences in real time, typical of play, it was a real gym where the pedagogical principle of *learning by doing* finds its application. At the same time, it was impure because it was immersed in the urban living context in which the relationship between danger and risk is weak, protective and control factors are minimal or even absent, and a child is exposed to encounters featuring adventure or misadventure traits.

Emblematic of that authentic and impure dimension was Pier Paolo Pasolini and his passion for the soccer played on the green areas of the suburbs in the meadows of Caprara in Bologna, when he was a student, and afterwards in Rome in the neighborhoods of Quarticciolo, a territory inhabited by the so-called “ragazzi di vita” (hustlers). In fact, the great writer preferred the lives of the boys who populated an increasingly inhospitable city for the free play it fostered (fig. 1). In his novels play, and particularly the soccer played in its rough and authentic forms, emerges as a highlighter of the crisis of an urban society based on an inauthentic sense of wellbeing.



Figure 1 – Pierpaolo Pasolini plays soccer in the Roman suburbs

In the famous novel *The Pal Street boys*, by Ferencz Molnar, first published in 1906, we find the irreducible need for playgrounds in the city and their symbolic value. It recounts the adventures of two gangs who live in Budapest in the late 19th century and both want to occupy a space in which to play Pal Street, the end of which formed a unique space with buildings, rented by a sawmill and full of piles of wood. Molnar (1978) explains:

That strip of dry, uncultivated, uneven, bumpy land of the city of Budapest; that space close between two rental apartment blocks represented for their naive soul the American prairie in the morning and the wide Magyar lowlands in the afternoon. The puszta! ... and the sea when it rained, and the North pole in Winter the ... yes, yes, a secure friend who, for amusing them, used to change its appearance satisfying their fantasies (p. 26).

The Pal Street boys, led by the fair and generous Boka, are the ones who discover and occupy the ground first. It becomes their playground, they love it and take care of it, they defend it against those who

claim the same right to designate a place where to play: the gang of the botanical garden, led by the brave Franco Hats. Thus, the two gangs meet and agree on the rules of the “war” that will eventually determine who settles in the area of the Pal Street: Boka’s group, who manages to defend it, or Hats’ group if he manages to occupy it and plant their flag there.

After a century, Molnar’s novel becomes emblematically topical and can be read as a “parable” of social and educational nature concerning the right to play and the child’s need for spaces in the urban environment that reveal all their inhospitality towards children. This parable begins with the evocative description of the field and closes with the end of the game, which is marked not only by the ultimate sacrifice of the little Nemeček, but also by the end of the field itself, which Boka sees one day filled with construction tools. Soon the workers would come to dig everywhere in the field to lay the foundations of a building [...]. At that point, Molnar (1978) writes, Boka “fled from that piece of infidel land which they had defended with so much suffering, with such heroism, and now it abandoned them, betrayed them and let built on his back a big tenement to rent [...]” (p. 216).

Pal Street might be considered a metaphor for a playing space where everyone, at some point in their childhood, has found and defended from the incursions and intrusion of others, especially adults. This street assumes the function not only of an outdoor physical space conquered by play, but also of an inner personal space, an inviolable territory of the imagination without which no external space, even if available, would become “Pal Street” (fig. 2).

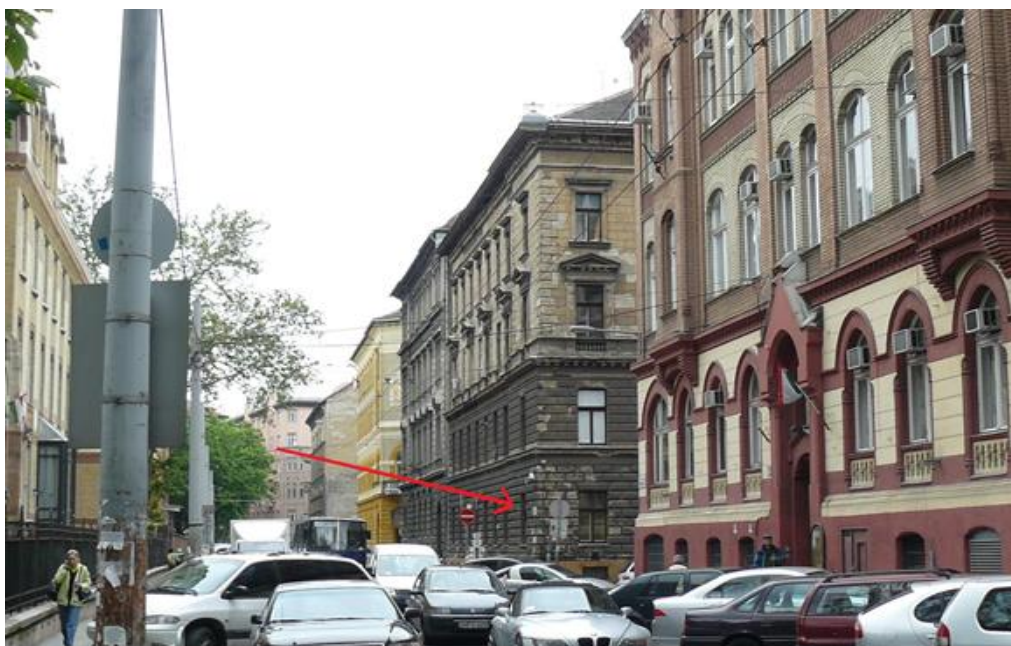


Figure 2 – Pal Street in Budapest, today.

The urban adventure that revolves around the playing field, as narrated by Molnar, becomes in a pedagogical key the metaphor for a change that is a structural and intentional indicator of every educative experience. The external change in the field from which free space disappears to give way to buildings, becomes an image of the internal change in the young characters: the time of childhood and its games is coming to an end and reality takes over, even if not always in a pleasant way. The time of illusion (*in-ludere*) is followed by the time of disillusion: the year 2015 was remembered for the centenary of the “Great War” and I thought that Boka, Hats and their playmates were the right age: they would pass from playing war-games in the Pal Street’s field to the battlefields of the real war, as soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

This signals a passage from the literary to the photographic image, it is interesting to find images that represent the urban playful dimension of childhood captured live and not merely relegated to subjective memory. In the history of photography, Robert Doisneau's work offers us a truly exemplary "point of view". Doisneau is an important figure for those who wish to find in the images an authentic representation of childhood full of educational and playful allusions to the Forties and Fifties of the 19th century.

He was defined as one of the most representative street photographers in the exercise of photojournalism, capturing human trait, especially the faces and gestures of the daily life, which reveals a kind of poetry of the ordinary and restrained charm. He used to spend pleasant hours, as he states, "looking at things and human living beings that we normally consider uninteresting but if you pay attention they hide a charge of emotions, tenderness or weirdness" (Nori, 1978, p. 58) (fig. 3).



Figure 3 – R. Doisneau, *Child lying in Place du Louvre*, Paris

Doisneau meets and takes pictures of children playing in the city streets and in the suburban areas, and in the courtyards. They are the subject of his most intense in production. In particular, some of these images have become modern "icons" of a childhood that, in the vitality of its games, positively expresses, almost proudly, its existence in a time of our recent history when children were not at the centre of the adults' attention (Romano, 1996; Doisneau, 2000).

Today, visiting a Doisneau exhibit or browsing through one of his photo catalogues and selecting the topic of "children in the city", on the one hand can evoke a pleasant effect of nostalgia or disorientation, on the other hand it can be a significant point of observation from which to analyse in concrete terms the childhood condition in an urban environment that, over time has undergone a "genuine cultural change". In these pictures, the space of the streets and the border where the city seems to end, define a kind of open air "gym" where the *outdoor education* develops spontaneously and naturally. The children, bodies-in-motion, and their imagination are the protagonists of the play activity. Thanks to the deft mediation of Doisneau's photographic eye, we can read the symbolic force that transforms those spaces. Two children walking on their hands or those engaged in a skating race along rue de Canettes, the image of children enlivening the carcass of a car, to identify name only a few of the photos on this issue, are emblems of a childhood striving to build, through play, a significant part of its education, one left free or kept outside the family and school relationships (and constrictions) (figures 4, 5, 6, 7).



Figure 4 – R. Doisneau, *Le remorqueur du champs de Mars, Paris*



Figures 5 and 6 – R. Doisneau, *Children walking on their hands*; R. Doisneau, *Skating race, rue de Canettes, Paris, 1949*



Figure 7 – R. Doisneau, *The burnt car*, 1944

What is amazing and makes one think when looking at Doisneau's pictures, is the absolute normality of the multiple dimensions of play that found its way into the streets, the alleys, the suburban areas. It was a normality now impossible to recreate as everything has changed in the urban landscape, unless our pedagogical sensitivity (and competence) finds the space to accommodate children's authentic need for play, which remains unchanged in its "naturalness", children themselves can no longer find.

At the end of the Seventies, René Schérer and Guy Hocquenghem (1979) wrote that "the child outside, who lives out of a familiar or school plot, and of a surveillance context, is properly unimaginable because he is untraceable" (p. 54). In other words, the child who moves outdoors destabilizes the adult responsible for his or her supervision; unless the child makes the adult anxious. It is not so much the case that the child is exposed to risk and insecurity (indeed, the child often seeks these out) as much as it is the adult who sees the conditions that enable the supervision of each child within a given space made problematic.

"The child outside is difficult imagine [...]. At every hour of the day, the child is entirely defined within a certain field whose structure is for him or her more or less elastic. But it is always imperative, spatially and temporarily determined. The child must be located somewhere [...], must always say where he or she is and be accountable of what he or she did or what is doing" (Schérer & Hocquenghem, 1979, pp. 54-55).

If we believe that the city as a space for playing and for developing autonomy, movement, and free sociability continues to have its own educational relevance, then the question is how to return to childhood a field of experience that, in the recent past, belonged "naturally" and has been stolen?

Attention to the issues and practices that we call *outdoor education* and, more specifically the school practices we define as *outdoor learning*, have gained increased relevance at the international level in the domain of education (Farné & Agostini, 2014). This orientation stems, on the one hand from the discomfort of a childhood living condition increasingly "under house and school arrest", unable to move freely in the territory, and inhibited in the search for that "sense of adventure" involved in each experience where "running a risk" is part of the game. On the other hand, it originates empirical research data indicating that:

- a) children psychometric abilities and skills have gradually decreased over recent time;
- b) the child population is overweight and the incidence of obesity has increased;

c) children show frailty and psychological and social insecurity when dealing directly in problem solving situations.

These questions underlie what Richard Louv (2006) has described as *Nature Deficit Disorder*, seen in children whose lifestyle is lacking in experiences based on a relationship with the natural environment. While educators and psychologists focus on the drastic increase in the number of children affected by the more well-known *Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder*, we lose sight of the fact that, according to Louv's thesis, this disorder could be an effect of ADHD (Gray, 2015).

A survey carried out in Italy on a significant sample of kindergarten teachers showed that 72% of them do not regularly use the external space especially because of weather conditions potential risks for the children, difficulties in managing the group, etc. (Ravelli, 2010). From my point of view, that of a member of a research group working for the past four years on these issues, I challenge the definition of "learning environment" designed primarily as *indoor* space structured on the basis of digital and multimedia devices. From the constructivist approach, to which we owe the concept of "learning environment", I believe that the external natural and social environment, starting from the closest area of the school-yard or the surrounding territory, is the primary learning environment that continues add extends the school space that we define as "base camp".

People with a limited experience in scouting or hiking know what I mean with this metaphor: i.e., the relationship between the base camp and the exploratory path; for those who practise sports, I could use another metaphor that captures the relationship between the locker room and the playing field. The locker room is, by definition, the place where you are preparing to enter the field, but, at the connotative level, it represents much more: it is the place where you live the psychological dimension of sharing, where you cope with emotions and articulate the experiences lived before and after the game. It is there that the coach prepares the athletes for entrance into the contest and then helps them to reflect on the lived experience of the contest. Let us ask ourselves now: What would be a base camp from which the hikers never go out, but simply observe and study the paths on maps or even on technologically advanced tablets? What would a dressing room mean for a sports team ready to go out onto the field in order to train or play the game, but remains inside the locker room and study tactics and strategies even with the help of sophisticated software support?

Obviously, in the base camp and in the dressing room, and we can also say in the classroom, you learn and prepare, but to do what and on what? If we deprive the learning subject on his or her formative path of that learning environment where the experiences occur in direct contact with real, physical and natural reality, where the body comes to play with its intelligence and sensitivity, with its thoughts and language-in-action, what is the meaning of what we like to call a close and protected "learning environment"?

Alberto Manzi, a famous school teacher whom I often cite, said: "Nowadays the younger generation lives in boxes of sorts (home, car, school, car, home, TV); they do not have a chance to think in new situations or to prepare for unexpected events. Thus, they need the freedom, the risk-taking, to start living the little things, to live new, strong and traumatic sensations. And only by getting out, living outside, can they experience the smell of the rain and the music of the wind, discover sounds, the darkness of the night, the moon, the silence, the taste of the rain falling on their face [...] the dawn, the night [...] now they must have all these things. They have the right to experience these things, in order to grow up in harmony" (Farné, 2011, p. 124). In other words, I can explain the water cycle to the children in the classroom, and, if I am a teacher provided with good teaching skills, children understand and learn; but it is not the same thing if the children have experienced "the taste of the rain on the face".

The school is not real life, in the school nothing is natural; it is an artefact, one of the most wonderful inventions of our modern times in which has been built (and imposed) the success of our social and cultural model across the globe. We should take care of this institution, this "invention", and treat it much better than what we do (at least in my country). We owe to Comenius the modern project of didactics as a teaching and learning science and of the school as an institutional organization for learners. His work, *Orbis sensualium pictus*, published in 1658, is considered the first children's book with illustrations aimed at children starting school. Reprinted for about two centuries, it represented a kind of editorial canon for modern

didactics. It is interesting to note that the first image in the book shows a child with his teacher not in a classroom, but in the open air (fig. 8).



Figure 8 – Comenius, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, 1658.

The teacher tells the child to look at the world around him: we see trees, the sky with clouds, the sun, and in the background a city. In the *Orbis pictus* two teaching units are dedicated to the city and seven to games: that is not bad for a school book.

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