

bored and fractious child ‘why don’t you go out and play?’ The assumption behind such a remark is that play is an identifiable, discrete and purposeful activity. We have ‘playtime’ at school, which suggests very much the same. In fact, play is really not a separate activity at all. There are of course times when it is formalized into a game or carried out with a very particular kind of toy, but in fact children play more or less all the time. It is better thought of as the child’s way of interacting with others and with the world. Most importantly, it is also the way children learn about the world. It is through imitating adults, acting out our situations and through pretence that children come to understand how the world works. Even the simple laws of nature, such as gravity, are explored through the bouncing of a ball or bumping down the stairs on your bottom! The institutionalization of play into formal times and places is thus an imposition on the child by adults, and is mainly done for the convenience of those adults. It is much easier to design environments that work well for children if you just bear these simple ideas in mind.

Jane Jacobs’ essay on the ‘The uses of sidewalks: assimilating children’ beautifully explored these ideas (Jacobs, 1961). She showed that in older parts of the city children played mainly on the streets and sidewalks (pavements in British parlance), whereas in the newer cities such structures had been swept away and the children given purpose-designed playgrounds. At first sight such a change seems an improvement – the newer playgrounds could be safe and supervised places after all. However, in reality such an analysis is far too simple, and is again based on the misconception of play as a discrete and purposeful activity in its own right.

Jacobs goes further, and argues that children who play on the street are incidentally also likely to learn that any adult will look out for them and care for their safety. The shopkeeper who tells them not to run across the road does not just increase safety, but also helps to socialize the child. By contrast, the playground supervisor is paid to do this and has a totally different relationship with children. We can go even further, of course, and see that play on the streets does not separate out children from other adult life. Such play is far more likely to create useful learning than the more sterile activity of the playground.

Of course children know all this, even if planners and architects do not, and this is because they are using ‘ordinary knowledge’, not ‘designer knowledge’. For a number of years I used to shop every week at a supermarket in a suburban shopping centre in Birmingham. In effect this was designed as a podium on top of which were the car parks for the shoppers, and rising out above were housing blocks (Fig. 8.3). One part of the roof of the shopping centre had been ‘designed’ as a children’s playground for the residents of the high-rise housing. I never once saw children play there; it was too bleak, sterile and dull, and the