

Re-Imagining Outdoor Playspaces: An Unexpected Consequence of the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

This paper presents a series of reflective observations on the use of outdoor spaces in Melbourne, Australia, during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. With the closure of playgrounds and organized sports, the authors observed three themes emerging: changes in users and uses of parks and reserves; markers of children's activities in public areas; and, children's creation of huts, dens or "cubbies" as evidence of constructive and imaginative play. Using a small-scale autoethnographic methodology through individual random observations, journaling and photography, the authors found clear indications of a new, deeper connection to public and natural spaces across generations and within each of their separate "lockdown" communities. A more visible presence of children and play activity in each authors' local natural spaces suggests that these places are a source of wellbeing and resilience in challenging times.

Keywords: outdoor playspaces; intergenerational shared spaces; sense of place; children's hut, den or cubby building; use of outside space during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

Introduction

Place plays an important role in both children's and adults' lives (Gill, 2007; Hart, 1979; Moore, 2017; Rasmussen, 2004). Over time, place-based researchers have found that a connection with place, a visceral sense of place, is an integral aspect of lived experience (Greber, 2001). This paper presents a collection of autoethnographical reflective observations focused on the use of outdoor places in and around Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown period. The use of an informal, observation-based study conducted by the three authors identified compelling evidence on the significant changes in the use of place during this challenging time. The observations and photography generated by the study revealed shifts in perceptions of place from those held prior to the COVID-19 lockdown. For example, a previous study conducted by two of the authors, Moore and Jeavons (2018), found there had been a tendency for different generations to hold "ill-founded assumptions" about where, when and by whom particular places can be used for play (p. 20). Couched within the theories of place and space, this paper provides more nuanced ways of looking at place and its role in the lives of children and adults in recent times.

The paper begins by positioning itself within a place-based theoretical framework, followed by an historical overview of the development of formal playgrounds designed by adults for children. The context of the Victorian COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions and playground closures are explained; then, the autoethnographic observational study is introduced. Reflective journal entries, observations and photographs are presented as data and discussed, illustrating shifts in the way place, space and shared outdoor spaces were perceived during the pandemic lockdown. A new way of viewing shared, intergenerational, outdoor playspaces is offered as a positive unexpected consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Spaces and Places Matter

Researchers analyzing the theories of space and place over time have found that during the late 19th century, "space" was considered purely the concern of cartographers and geographers to be "investigated, mapped and classified" (Valentine, 2016, p. 8). Valentine explains, "Space was conceptualized as an objective physical surface with specific fixed characteristics upon which social identities and categories were mapped out" (p. 8). However, by the mid-20th century, an understanding that "space was not simply an objective structure" was starting to emerge (Valentine, 2016, p. 8). Subsequently, philosophers and researchers such as Bachelard (1964), Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977) were examining the importance of space and place to people's lived experiences, especially around the notion of an attachment to specific places. Cele's (2006) more recent work suggests that the "[p]erception of place is a subjective process, and this process has different meaning and importance to different people. To some, there is almost no difference between their own identity and the place they live in..." (p. 14). Similarly, Lim and Barton (2010) argue that, "place is not an objective phenomenon; rather it has to be interpreted and reconstructed by children..." (p. 329); Jack (2010) claims that a "primordial hefting urge" triggers an emotional and physical need to seek out places where feelings of belonging are heightened (p.

756). Collectively, these historical and contemporary scholars have found that “spaces” with socially constructed meanings can become transformed into meaningful “places.”

The notion of “space” becoming a “place” when “imbued with meaning” (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977) has been further conceptualized through Gibson’s (1979) theory of place affordances, which refers to the perception of “functionally significant properties of materials” available within a place (Storli & Hagen, 2010, p. 448). The perception of how place can be used is of relevance to this paper, with different generations perceiving the use of place in different ways. Place-based literature highlights the importance of place to children (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Rasmussen, 2004), youth (Owens, 2012) and older adults (Biggs & Carr, 2015; Gibson, 2018), and illustrates how different generations construct the meanings of place differently. For example, this concept is evident in children’s use of place in Hart’s (1979), Moore’s (1986), and later, Rasmussen’s (2004) exemplary work on children’s experience of place. In each respective study, children described how they found, constructed and used their own places, with strong affiliations with trees, bushes and places of seclusion. The concept of meaningful places is also evident in Owens’ (2012) study on how youth search for their own demarcation of place, despite policies that appear to “intentionally exclude” youth from public spaces (p. 156). Meaningful places are also sought out by older adults according to Gibson’s (2018) study into their motivation to visit parks, where many participants looked for the “provision of shade trees” and a sense of autonomy to feel safe while in the park (p. 245). Biggs and Carr’s (2015) research on age- and child-friendly cities claim there are multiple “examples of unsafe, insecure and unwelcoming settings” in urban environments that work toward “excluding older adults” (p. 102). These place-based theories provide a lens through which to view the human experience of place, with children’s early experiences seen to be influential on their connection with their “own” place as an adult (Chawla, 2007).

Herding Children into Adult-Designed Playgrounds

Children’s experience of place can be seen to align with how children and their multiple childhoods have been perceived differently in each era (Cunningham, 2006; Qvortrup, 2009). Qvortrup (2009) explains the shifting concept of childhood by suggesting socially constructed attitudes and values change the way children are viewed by adults in each historical context. For example, while children were thought of as “miniature adults” in earlier centuries when they were engaged in adult work in cities and on farms (Pascoe, 2009), there was a shift in thinking around the 18th century about children needing to be protected from the “dangers of the adult world” (Pascoe, 2009, p. 216). This attitude shift was reflected in the introduction of Froebel’s “kindergartens” (children’s gardens) in 1837, which were based on the premise of the “innocent child” needing to be protected as the “child in nature” enclosed within walled gardens (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 46). In contrast, children who played on the streets were seen to be “menacing and dangerous” rather than needing protection (Valentine, 2016, p. 1).

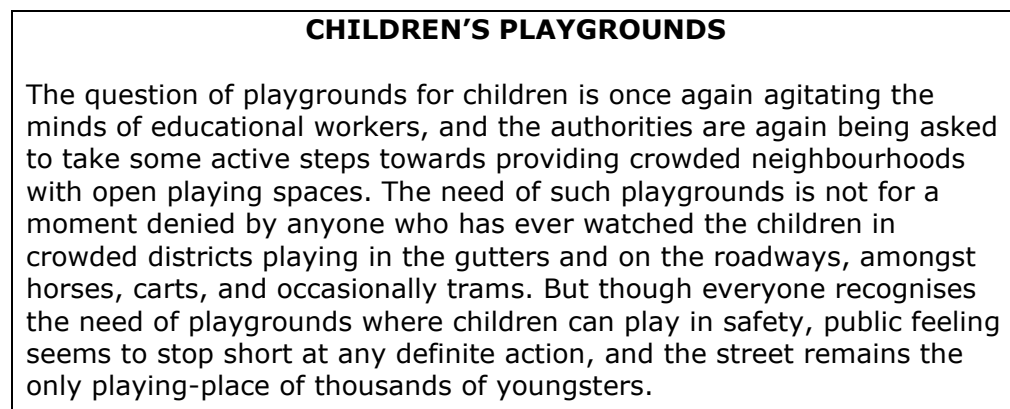
In the late 19th century, an attitude shift was again evident through the criticism of children’s outside play in Melbourne’s newly established parks. Sleight’s (2013)

research of complaints about “unruly children” reports on the “unbearable” behavior of children playing in Darling Square in 1897, when E.J. Jubbs declared:

...the Gardens are filled with children who simply turn it into a large play ground, and their calls, screams and laughter are a perfect nuisance to residents adjacent to the square... the noise is simply unbearable. Surely... it was never intended that a crowd of unruly children would run wild all over the place in the way they do (p. 58).

It can be extrapolated from this reported complaint that the local parklands as well as the streets were not intended as places for children’s play. Researchers such as Valentine (2016) and Chancellor (2016) claim the global “playground movement” at this time was a direct result of adults attempting to “gain control over children and stop them running wild” (Valentine, 2016, p. 4). Similarly, Chancellor (2016) found those in governance when Melbourne was first founded were especially concerned about “where children should play, their health, wellbeing and morality,” believing formal playgrounds would alleviate these issues (p. 8). Figure 1 below shows an example of a newspaper article from 1913 calling for space to be provided for playgrounds for the “thousands of youngsters” playing on the streets:

Figure 1. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 10, 1913



Source: original extract accessed from Trove Newspapers

From the mid- to late-20th century, another shift in thinking around the image of the child as “vulnerable” reinforced the adult perception that children needed to be protected from the realities of the world (Qvortrup, 2009). This perception increased the call for the provision of dedicated outside playspaces for children, particularly as children’s independent mobility began to decline in the later part of the 20th century (Clements, 2004; McKendrick, 2009; Wilson, 2012). However, this adult-instigated call for children’s formal playgrounds was not always what children have said they wanted (Hart, 1979; Moore, 2017; Rasmussen, 2004; Valentine, 2016). Valentine (2016, p. 75) describes this mismatch between adult and children’s perceptions of “different kinds” of play places further by arguing,

While adults emphasize the benefits of safe playgrounds and institutional play spaces, children need places that afford different kinds of opportunities

and experiences (Gibson, 1979). Indeed, there is some evidence that children do not necessarily want the sort of institutional... play opportunities they are being given, and that adults fail to take into account children's ways of seeing (Matthews, 1995).

This mismatch has been exacerbated in more recent times with contemporary children becoming even more “hemmed in by surveillance and social regulation than ever before” (James et al., 1998, p. 7) in our increasingly risk-averse society (Gill, 2007). As a consequence of this aversion to risk, adults’ perception of safety and risk has heavily impacted the type of public outdoor play spaces provided for contemporary children. Furthermore, Gill (2014) has lamented that children’s public outdoor playspaces now commonly consist of standardized, fixed-equipment playgrounds, usually positioned on artificial surfaces, where parents are expected to supervise their children’s play.

In stark contrast with this trend, however, current research has illustrated the need for change in societal understanding about outdoor playspaces for contemporary children, including: the urgent need for children to have access to natural playspaces (Elliott, 2010); the acknowledgement that children are capable of constructing their own playspace (in the form of a hut, den—or to use the Australian term for a child-constructed, enclosed place, “cubby” (Moore, 2017); that “playable space” should not be limited to “dedicated playspaces for children” (Kernan & Devine, 2010, p. 205); and, the provision of only fixed equipment on artificial surfaces is no longer considered an adequate or quality outdoor environment for children’s play, especially for emotionally, cognitively and socially significant sociodramatic play (Morrissey et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2019; Morrissey et al., 2020).

COVID-19 Lockdown Reflections: Noticing Changes in the Use of Outdoor Playspaces

With the dramatic advent of the global COVID-19 pandemic, legally enforced restrictions were put in place throughout Australia to stop communal access to public playgrounds. On March 24, 2020, both state and federal governments directed the “temporary closure” of public playgrounds as part of the first lockdown phase in Australia. Following a short lifting of lockdown restrictions in June 2020, and then a major spreading event in July 2020, the State of Victoria, and particularly the city of Melbourne, then entered one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world. Schools and kindergartens were closed and attendance at childcare centers was limited to children of essential workers and those deemed to be vulnerable if they were unable to access childcare.

From March to July, and then again, from August to November 2020, residents of Melbourne were only permitted to leave their homes for one hour per day with household members only, for basic shopping and exercise. From October, the amount of time allowed outside later became two hours as restrictions were gradually eased as case numbers declined. However, playgrounds and organized sports for all ages remained closed, and public outdoor recreation was limited to streets, beaches, parks and nature reserves within a 5-kilometer radius of people’s

homes during this time.

Figure 2. An example of an inner-city pocket park with tape around the playground equipment to signify closure of the playground



Local, state and federal governments informed the Australian population of the official restrictions through newspapers, online news feeds, and social media, as well as televised and radio announcements. For example, local newspapers confirmed the closures on the front pages of their broadsheet publications to quickly disseminate this information to their local communities, as seen here in Warrnambool's *The Standard News* article (Figure 3):

Figure 3. *The Standard News*, March 26, 2020 explaining closures in a Victorian local government area

Council Drives the "Stay Home" Message by Closing Playgrounds, Skate Park, Dog Park

Katrina Lovell

Warrnambool's dog park, skate park, council playgrounds and public barbecues will be closed from today to help stop the spread of COVID-19. [Council officers] said, "We acknowledge that these measures are impacting on people's lives but we believe, based on the advice we have received from the Australian and Victorian governments that these actions are in the best interests of our community... They will be particularly challenging for parents with children who want to be out and about...."

Given our propensities as researchers of outdoor play spaces, we had each started to notice changes in the use of our local outdoor places from the beginning of the lockdown period. In a video and email conversation between Authors 1 and 2, we decided to initiate the study and invited Author 3 to participate. The COVID-19 lockdown presented an opportunity to examine changes in the use of outdoor recreational spaces when the usual structured and organized spaces and activities were no longer available to children, youth and their families. As a consequence of these noticeable changes, we each started to compile a “collective autoethnography,” described by Chang and colleagues (2012) as interpretative journal writings “created by researchers from memory on various topics, events, people, places, objects, senses and thoughts” whilst “capturing one’s stream of consciousness” (p. 74). As our observations were of a “random” nature and not targeted towards particular participants in any way, a human ethics application was deemed unnecessary for this reflective research project. Our observations were based in our own locales in metropolitan Melbourne: Author 1 in an outer bayside suburb, Author 2 in a middle-ring suburb, and Author 3 in an inner urban area. Each of us engaged in daily walks within our local community (as allowed per the lockdown restrictions), and each of us noticed a varied number of children and/or adults dependent on factors such as the time of day, the weather, and whether it was a home “school” day or not. As the lockdown continued, we noticed the startling similarities we were each witnessing in our geographically separate communities, with journal entries once or twice a week over the lockdown period illustrating significant changes in the children’s and adults’ use of place.

Following the thematic analysis of the observational and written data we had created, the changes we observed over the lockdown period can be classified under the following three key themes:

1. Changes in users and uses of tracks (paths), parks and reserves;
2. Markers of children’s activities in streets and public recreation areas; and,
3. Huts, dens or cubbies as public evidence of children’s constructive and imaginative play.

Each of these key themes will be presented and discussed in the following sections using the photographs, reflective journal entries and observations as visual and written data from our autoethnographic research.

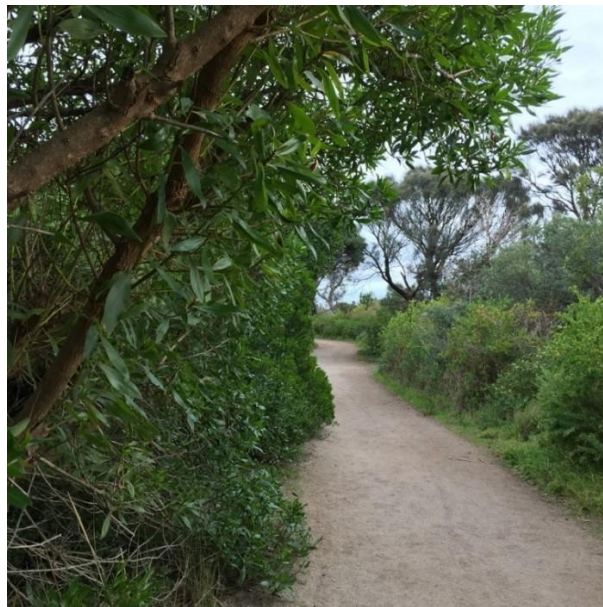
“Sharing the Space”: Changes in Usage of Tracks, Parks and Reserves

It was early in the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown in Melbourne that we started recording observations, taking photographs and writing reflective journals about what we were watching unfold in our local outdoor places. Significant changes were starting to become evident, for example, when Author 1 observed, photographed and wrote the following reflective journal entries at the beginning of the first lockdown period:

Another day in lockdown, another early morning walk along the cliff path above the beach... I am finding it amazing how many people are walking the same bush track every day... (Author 1, March 28, 2020).

Late afternoon walk along the cliff track... grandparents, teenagers, young adults, children on bikes and parents with prams are all manoeuvring respectfully around each other, smiling our greetings to familiar strangers who are no longer strange... there is a real sense of connection through this shared collective experience ... and, we are clearly sharing the space (Author 1, April 4, 2020).

Figure 4. Bush track along cliff overlooking the beach where many different generations used the space simultaneously



Wending our way along the bush track for our morning walk, past the puddles and the puddle-suited children, the gaggle of jogging teenagers, the grandparents and the parents with prams and a wood-duck-like trail of children behind them... All smiling and nodding our good mornings as we respectfully share the track during our Government "approved" outside time and space... (Author 1, April 21, 2020).

In contrast to an earlier study by Moore and Jeavons (2018) where the findings highlighted a lack of intergenerational sharing of outside space, it was especially noticeable in this current study how each of the generations found a new way to "manoeuvre" around each other in an observably respectful, overtly friendly way. Sharing these outdoor spaces became a matter of course, one where everyone appeared to have become increasingly aware of each other's spatial requirements rather than making teenagers, little children and/or elderly walkers feel unwelcome in the same space. Washington and colleagues (2019) have proposed that we need to "connect and not divide generations" by moving beyond stereotypical "media portrayals of different generations" (p. 3). Given this new, more respectful way of simultaneously using outdoor spaces along the pathways, it appears the lockdown experience has disrupted the previous exclusive use of space and created a more

intergenerational approach to how different spaces can be used and appreciated.

Similarly, Author 2 observed how children and adults used a bush reserve near her house that extended for about 1.5 km alongside a creek. The reserve contained some extended areas of indigenous bush, as well as central graveled paths. Prior to the pandemic, Author 2 had observed that this reserve was used mainly by adults walking or jogging, and sometimes adults with younger children riding bikes. When lockdown began, the paths suddenly thronged with adults, children and teenagers walking and bike riding during their allotted one hour of exercise. The impression was of families doing things together in the reserve, mostly on the paths.

Figure 5. A bush track close by Author 2's house now has become a shared bike path for use by different generations as evidenced by adult and child bike riders in the distance



As the lockdown went on, there appeared to be a shift in the way some children and adolescents used the reserve. While adults and children were still cycling and walking together, increasingly groups of children and adolescents were observed moving away from the paths and activities with adults, to play in groups around the creek and deep in the bush areas. They appeared deeply engrossed in imaginative and active play, and taking on physical challenges such as scrambling on rocks or balancing on logs to cross the creek. The reserve began to resound with the shouts and laughter of children playing, not just the sounds of adult conversation.

As I was returning home, I saw a group of boys seated in a circle in the bush, deep in conversation. I had observed them an hour earlier playing around the creek on my way down. A father came looking for them, and on finding them, said: "Come on boys, it's nearly five o'clock. You were expected home an hour ago." Over the years I have used this reserve, I have observed only a handful of children and adolescents using the bush and creek

areas (as opposed to cycling on the paths) for play. It was as though forced by lockdown into the reserve for recreation, both parents and children have become at ease with it and children are now permitted to independently connect and engage with its "wilder," more natural aspects (Author 2, September 30, 2020).

In this reflective journal entry, it is interesting to note the shift in an adult view of what constitutes a safe place for children's play. Recent literature and research into contemporary children's decreasing independent mobility has shown that adults, including in Australia, are less likely to allow their children to "roam" outside the home fence line in our risk-averse society (Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007; Shakespear et al., 2020). However, the interaction between the parent and the children witnessed by Author 2 in this reflection pushes back against the "bubble-wrapped child" phenomenon to which Malone (2007) refers and suggests instead that parents during the pandemic lockdown were starting to perceive outside natural spaces in different, more accessible ways for their children's play.

As the lockdown eased and people could gather outside with another household, the reserve became a site for picnics, with groups of people on rugs scattered around sharing food and drink, or even with picnic chairs and tables set up. Author 2 had not previously observed the reserve being used in this communal way.

Author 3 also noted changes in usage of a nature reserve in her inner urban locale. Figure 6 shows a small triangle-shaped reserve near a train station. Prior to lockdown, Author 3 had observed that it was mostly used for the occasional ball game and lots of dog walking. This dramatically changed with the pandemic lockdown. As explained in Author 3's reflective journal entry below, the lockdown brought an increased use of the reserve by a collection of different generations engaged in an increased number of uses. Author 3 also noted greater engagement with the natural affordances of the reserve, such as fossicking (searching for things on the ground) around puddles and engaging with the "looseness" of the environment (see Figure 7). Like Author 2, she also noticed more engagement by children in challenging activities involving natural features, such as tree climbing (see Figure 8) in places where children had not been seen previously.

Figure 6. Bike jump pathway created during lockdown close by Author 3's house near an inner-city creek



During COVID 19 lockdown... the reserve has erupted with people who began to construct their own dirt bike paths, bumps, jumps and "mini berms" (raised bank of earth). At times, the park is full of tiny kids on balance bikes, teenagers, parents on their own bikes, and a few other watchful parents who meet and chat while keeping an eye on the kids. In quieter moments we have observed young adults take a deliberate detour through the park to enjoy the trail, and at other times some spill-over cycling activities, with late primary-school-aged children challenging themselves nearby by constructing ramps with planks and balancing over home-made challenges (Author 3, April, 2020).

Figure 7. Fossicking or searching for things on the ground in the inner urban reserve



Figure 8. Tree climbing in a reserve



Observing these changes, it appeared the reserves, parks and tracks close by people's homes had been discovered, and potentially re-discovered, by each generation with a recalibrated sense of the value of their own local natural play places.

Playgrounds and Streets: Markers of Children's Play Activities

In addition to changes in the usage of parks and reserves, the authors also noted lockdown-induced changes in the usage of playgrounds and evidence of children's play activities in the streets and other public areas. Author 2 had observed the use of a small local playground and surrounding area, both before and during the lockdown, and following the arrival of new families with children moving into the court shortly before lockdown.

Figure 9. Small local playground close by Author 2's home with local council's closure notice staked at the edge of the park



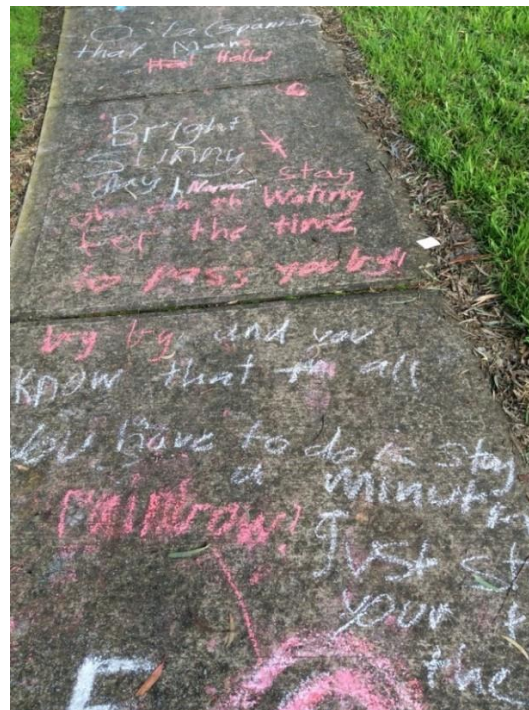
The court where I live has a park at the end, and on one side a large town house complex with some communal areas. Living adjacent to the park, it is easy for the researcher to become aware of how the park is used. It is a conventional small-scale playground, designed for the use of very young children (Author 2, July 8, 2020).

With the arrival of several families into the court, there was a shift towards using the playground space and adjacent areas as more communal outdoor playspaces, as a "pre-pandemic 'children's gang' transformed a quiet, deserted court into a lively place of children's play, conversation and laughter, after school and on weekends" (Author 2, April, 2020).

However, with the pandemic lockdown, children and adults from different households were no longer able to congregate in the park or play in the court together. The Council signage evident in Figure 9 declares the playground is closed.

Despite this, two children in one family continued to use the park and court for play on their own, albeit with a “public” element. They played in their garage open to the street, including setting up a pretend shop with posters advertising their “wares.” They also drew hopscotch and expressed feelings and left messages for friends and neighbors through chalk writing on the footpath (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Footpath descriptions and drawings by the children as to how they are feeling, witnessed by Author 2



Walking through the park into my townhouse, it is always interesting to see the un-self-conscious signs of the play that has been happening here. Examples include the signs advertising the pretend shop's wares, and the markings the children make on the footpath in the park, including a hopscotch game and statements of feelings while they were 'waiting for time to pass you by'..." (Author 2, July 8, 2020).

Interestingly, Author 3 had also noticed children's chalk drawings and artistic creations with leaves and flowers in local streets (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Patterns created by children using natural loose materials seen by Author 3 in an inner-city area



In a remarkably similar way to the other authors, Author 1 also came across chalk drawings by children expressing their feelings in relation to the pandemic lockdown (Figure 12 below).

Figure 12. Chalk drawings on the driveway seen by Author 1



Walking today around the local streets, I passed a child's chalk drawing with a picture of a person wearing a mask. The caption next to the person says, "Stay home, stay safe!" with a rainbow thrown in for good measure (Author 1, July 24, 2020).

Although unexpected, what was becoming increasingly evident during this time and in these places was children's visible creativity in association with their own sense of place in their local communities. While contemporary discourses on modern childhoods lament the loss of children's creativity and imaginative play (cf: Bodrova, 2008; Kim, 2011; Kehily, 2008), these transient markers of children's creative and "affective play" (Playwork Glossary, 2010) disputes the notion that childhood is "lost" somewhere in the cyber space of digital technology (Adams, 2013).

Wilson (2012) claims that children need to be given the opportunity to play in the "unidentified liminal... in-between spaces" beyond the home and formal playground fence line, which she has identified as crucial for the development of imaginative play (p. 32). Similarly, in Moore's (2017) study on intergenerational imaginative play, she argues that when children are given the time, space and opportunity, their highly creative, imaginative play will become increasingly enabled. During this pandemic when children were "locked out" of formal educational settings, playgrounds and organized sport, they had greater time, space and opportunity to express their creativity in a wide variety of ways and in a wide variety of "in-between spaces" that had not been commonly seen by adults in contemporary childhoods.

Huts, Dens or Cubbies as Public Evidence of Children's Constructive and Imaginative Play

An interesting phenomenon observed by all three authors from their respective beachside, suburban and inner-city locations during the lockdown, was the increasingly apparent creation of child-constructed huts, dens or cubbies in reserves and other public places, leaving further evidence of children's constructive and imaginative play. This is evident in the following photos, reflective journal entries and observations recorded by each of the authors.

Figure 13. Cubby on the nature strip, normally hidden from adult view

Today we noticed something different along the track... around behind the houses, adjacent to the fences, past the path that leads to the cliff track, a cubby has been built, we assume by children who are appropriating space that had originally just "belonged" to adults. The use of loose, discarded materials is clearly evident, hard work has happened here. As the lockdown has gone on, are the children becoming bolder in their border-crossings into previously adult-only space? (Author 1, May 28, 2020).

Figure 14. A very public bush cubby along the shared pathway close by the local creek near Author 1's home

Another walk, another cubby along the track, alongside the creek, a carefully crafted arrangement of tea-tree branches... no children in sight, but they have clearly been here... practising their place-making skills... (Author 1, July 5, 2020).

Figure 15. Another carefully constructed cubby by a different creek in the local beachside area nearby Author 1's house



Walking along a different bush track we hadn't explored before the pandemic, we came across another bush cubby showing imaginative play in the use of stone fireplace, bracken-laid flooring and other artefacts of play. While the players were never observed, they had clearly been there as the different elements were constantly moved and changed around every time we went past (Author 1, September, 2020).

Figure 16. Author 2 also observed a tree cubby that appeared during the lockdown period in a local street tree



While within her inner-urban locale, Author 3 observed and recorded a number of elaborate cubby constructions by various aged children, worked on and added to by different children over this period of time (see Figures 17-20 below):

Figure 17. Cubby built by local children nearby Author 3's home



Figure 18. Cubby using found natural materials near Author 3's home



Figure 19. Clearly visible cubbies emerged along pathways in places not previously used by children for cubby making



It was interesting to note that all of these cubbies represented a range of "architectural" styles and materials but all were supported by a suitable branch or tree trunk, and used whatever materials were available in the immediate local neighbourhood (Author 3, March-October, 2020).

Figure 20. Different materials collected for use for cubby making near Author 3's inner-city home



Historical and contemporary literature and research into children's imaginative places for play consistently refer to the importance of children making their own huts, dens or cubbies (cf: Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Sobel, 2002). As noted above, Hart (1979) and Moore's (1986) important work on children's experience of place dedicated much of their research into den-making in hidden places, away from the gaze of adults. Later research by Sobel (2002), Rasmussen (2004), Roe (2007) and more recently, Moore (2017), confirmed children's need for secrecy as an important element of their imaginative construction of cubbies. Given this understanding of children's cubby-making, our observations of how "public" children's cubby constructions had become during the pandemic lockdown was an unexpected realization. Further, we each perceived the increase in children's construction of cubbies positioned close by public pathways, tracks and streets as a demonstration of the children's willingness to share their cubby-construction expertise and imaginative play places with others in the community.

A New Way to Imagine Shared Intergenerational Outdoor Playspaces

In examining each of the authors' personal recollections, reflective journal entries, observations and photography during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, it became increasingly apparent that the intergenerational use of outdoor spaces we witnessed marked a shift in children's and adults' previous use and perception of place. In the past, the notion of a shared intergenerational playspace was considered too difficult to achieve given the negative stereotypical attitudes held by different generations (Washington et al., 2019), especially when one generation made another age group feel unwelcome in particular places (Moore & Jeavons, 2018). Moreover, prior to the pandemic, many adults in our risk-averse society (Gill, 2007) considered it safer for their children to be supervised playing inside formal playgrounds (Moore, 2017) and/or inside on digital devices than playing outside beyond the home fence line (Plowman et al., 2010). However, throughout this study, each of the authors consistently noticed in their respective local communities that all generations appeared to be more willing to share outdoor spaces and places on walking tracks, reserves and parks, than had been evident prior to the lockdown period.

Throughout these observations and reflections during the COVID lockdown, it was also evident to the authors that the children's agentic connection to their own local places was heightened in their use and creation of outdoor playspaces, often in ways that adults had not anticipated, expected or approved. In the past, users of public outdoor spaces "read" the space in terms of its intended uses and users via the nature of the provisions of the space (such as fixed playground equipment), and responses of common users (such as assumptions about who was or was not welcome in the space). Usage had also been influenced by normal routines and recreational practices. As an example, for many school-aged children and adolescents, organized sport is a major recreational activity rather than bike riding or imaginative play with peers in a nature reserve. However, this autoethnographical study shows that changes such as pandemic restrictions or new families moving into a neighborhood can change how both adults and children use parks and other public outdoor spaces. With lockdown restrictions and closure of

playgrounds limiting common usage, families had been “pushed” into parks, reserves and bush tracks that enabled social distancing, and facilitated adults and children engaging together in recreational activities such as walking and bike-riding. We observed that the play of children who were not able to attend kindergarten and school during lockdown began edging into public spaces such as local streets, nature strips and pathways, and they left evidence of their play activity such as cubbies, “shop” signs, and drawings on footpaths.

The authors’ observations of increased play by peer groups in bush settings within reserves was intriguing. It raises the possibility that with restrictions on recreational activities, families found new opportunities for their children to engage independently within wilder natural spaces for their play. This may have been due to parents feeling more secure in allowing their children to play without their close supervision due to their increased familiarity with the spaces, as well as greater community use with more people around. There may also have been pressures to allow children greater freedom as parents juggled conflicting obligations between working from home and home-schooling. The subsequent increased engagement with multiple natural spaces may be an unexpected benefit of the lockdown, and further evidence that events and neighborhood changes can provide impetus for communities to adopt new perspectives on their parks and public spaces.

As with any reflection-based interpretative research, we understand that the ways we collected and shared our memories and observations were subjective. However, despite the geographical distance from each other and the nature of our different locales, each of the authors’ reflections, observations and photographs were remarkably similar in their underlying tone, emotionality and content. This suggests these place-based changes may have been common across the Melbourne metropolitan and outer suburban areas as part of the collective experience of place during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. This view is supported by an article recently published in *The Age* newspaper by a parent reflecting on the effects of lockdown on his own children and others (Hendrie, 2020). In the absence of organized activities and school attendance, Hendrie (2020) noted that his children turned to other activities and developed new interests in nature and the outdoors to deal with the threat of boredom and fill the long stretches of time now available. His observations in public spaces strikingly reflect those of these authors, as seen in the following excerpt from *The Age*, November 29, 2020:

On my walks I saw the result of this new boredom in neighbourhood kids. Wild-haired teenage siblings who threw a rope over a branch and spent their precious outside time swinging over the creek. Others turned unloved parts of parks into BMX tracks, building their jumps little by little over weeks. Adults too. The golf course near me was temporarily turned over to the public, and people flocked to it, letting the trees soak up their time (Hendrie, 2020, n.p.).

A new way of looking at the role of place and intergenerational spaces had started to emerge throughout this study at this particular time and in these places. Moving beyond stereotypical assumptions around what children can and cannot do in the

spaces and places that surround them, a renewed perception of the possibilities for shared intergenerational playspaces may be one of the more positive unexpected consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, this may provide a basis for a permanent shift in thinking about intergenerational playspaces, beyond the previous narrow conceptions of who and what playgrounds, parks and reserves are for. Our findings also highlighted a new engagement with natural spaces by both children and adults. It can be expected that this immersion in the natural world would have led to an increased sense of wellbeing and a greater capacity in people to cope with the lockdown. This emphasizes the importance of easily accessible public green spaces for community health and wellbeing. The other important findings were the signs of children's greater sense of agency within public spaces, including the local streets, reflected through an observable increase in creativity and imaginative play in both streets and green spaces. Our observations evidence the creative and resilient responses by children to the rigors of the lockdown, producing unexpected positive outcomes for Melbourne families and communities.

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